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The Art and Science of Making the Impossible ... Routine

BY CONOR ORR P. 32

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LINEUP

SEPTEMBER 2020 | VOLUME 131 | NO. 11

99 PROBLEMS
Will a canceled World Series be one? Aaron Judge (eight homers in his first 16 games) and the Yankees hope not.

SI HAS FLIP COVERS THIS WEEK

Sports Illustrated
LEGENDS OF TOMORROW

GATORADE HIGH SCHOOL ATHLETES OF THE YEAR

STARS AMONG STARS

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ERICK W. RASCO (JUDGE); ALIKA JENNER/GETTY IMAGES (COVER BACKGROUND); COVER PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY SI ART

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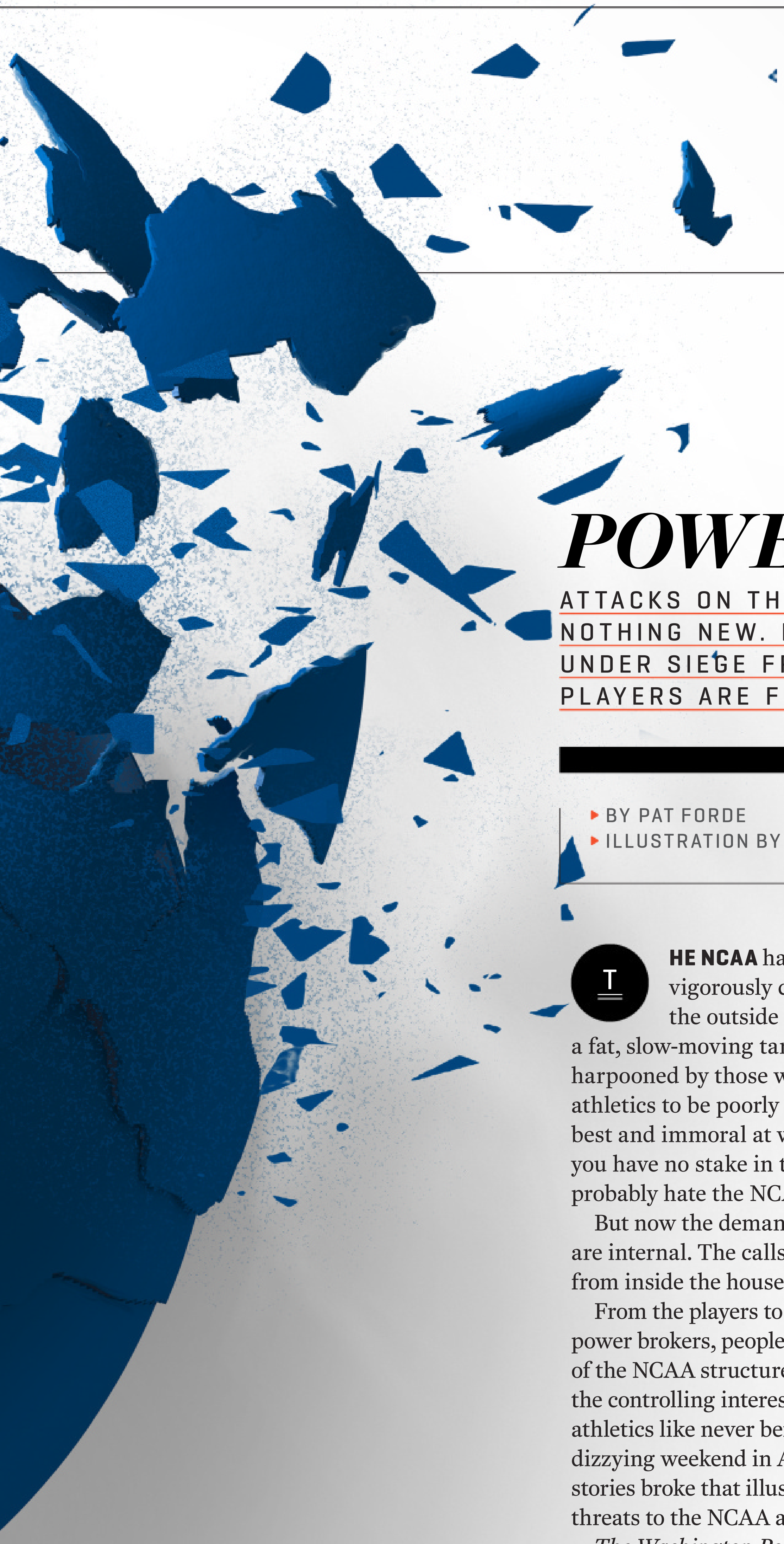

POWER PLAY

ATTACKS ON THE NCAA AND ITS AUTHORITY ARE NOTHING NEW. BUT NOW THE ORGANIZATION IS UNDER SIEGE FROM WITHIN, AS CONFERENCES AND PLAYERS ARE FLEXING THEIR MUSCLE

▸ BY PAT FORDE
▸ ILLUSTRATION BY ELLIS DEDÁ

THE NCAA has been vigorously criticized from the outside forever. It's a fat, slow-moving target, easily harpooned by those who find college athletics to be poorly governed at best and immoral at worst. Even if you have no stake in the NCAA, you probably hate the NCAA.

But now the demands for change are internal. The calls are coming from inside the house.

From the players to the conference power brokers, people who are part of the NCAA structure are assaulting the controlling interests of college athletics like never before. On a dizzying weekend in August three stories broke that illustrate existential threats to the NCAA as we know it.

The Washington Post obtained leaked audio from an SEC video call in which football players, during a discussion with league medical experts, voiced concerns about their safety amid COVID-19. Good for the conference for hosting the call for the players; bad for the SEC for reacting poorly to it being leaked.

Then hundreds of Pac-12 football players announced a proposed boycott, delivered a list of demands to conference and university leadership, and voiced their unified determination. In a summer of unprecedented player power, this is the biggest flex yet.

That same day, SI reported that leaders from Power 5 conferences had been discussing staging their own breakaway fall championships in the event the NCAA Board of Governors postponed or canceled them. While subsequent events rendered that concept largely moot, it's still significant: Though most of the conversation had been at the athletic-director level, at least one Power 5 commissioner was actively weighing the logistics of the concept, which would have seen each of the conferences host one fall championship.

For decades people have theorized and even fantasized about the Power 5 (the ACC, the Big 12, the Big Ten, the Pac-12 and the SEC) breaking off from the rest of Division I. This signifies an increased interest in a secession.

Taken individually, each story is startling news. Taken collectively, it is a flurry of body blows and a critical inflection point for college sports. Is a controversial system buckling beneath its own weight?

UNDER FIRE
Emmert, who has been NCAA president for 10 years, has support from the lower divisions, but not necessarily the Power 5.

DREW ANGERER/GETTY IMAGES

Can eternally embattled NCAA president Mark Emmert survive this? *Should* either Emmert or the institution itself survive?

"It's probably the toughest period the NCAA has faced in a long time," says one veteran Power 5 athletic director. "I can't look at an issue in recent times and say, 'We got good leadership on that.' It's hard not to see significant change coming out of this." Will that change include replacing Emmert, whose decade-long tenure has played out to a near-constant drumbeat of criticism?

"Probably not," says the AD, noting that small colleges with far less interest in athletics than the Division I powers could block an attempt to oust Emmert, who has solid support among university presidents, particularly in Divisions II and III. "Is there anything that speaks more to the limitations of the NCAA than the fact that Mark will probably survive?" This would be the definition of dysfunction: The wildly unpopular leader of a billion-dollar college sports entity saves his job thanks to schools that college sports fans barely pay attention to.

The landslide opinion within the industry is that the NCAA has provided precious little leadership during the pandemic. Its lack of national authority has been laid bare, as conferences have wound up making their own uncertain paths through the spring and summer and laying plans for the fall.

Then there are the bills coming due after decades of resistance to compensating college athletes, which has resulted in the NCAA's asking Congress to intervene and solve the problem. That chronic, underlying financial inequality is the largest driver of the player protest movement, which has only gained resonance due to COVID-19 concerns and racial protests.

For the longest time, the NCAA and all its power brokers could count on the traditionally compliant athletes to shut up and play. Now they've joined the chorus of critics—but with more clout. If they don't play, there are no games.

Assuming the games go on, there are still longer-term issues, the biggest being: *Is this the beginning of the end of the NCAA as we know it?*

It could be, but the ramifications would be massive and the new structure might be every bit as bad as the current one.

For years, the Power 5 has tolerated the NCAA for two big reasons: It organized, hosted and paid for national championships (well) and enforced the rules (not so well). Now, the championship part is subject to revocation. The compliance piece is harder, because the five conferences would seem as unlikely as rival organized crime syndicates at coming up with a way to police themselves.

"Just as they couldn't consolidate over the fall schedule, I think they'd have difficulty forming an entirely new entity," one AD told SI.

A new, Power 5 version of the NCAA would almost certainly feature a lot of the same old faces in college athletics, and most of those would be in favor of the same old principles: fistfuls of cash for the schools and resistance to sharing it with the players. It might kill off some of the layers of bureaucracy, but it might kill off the NCAA basketball tournament, too.

How much fun would March Madness be if it were simply 40(ish) Power 5 programs playing one another? Where is the charm in an event that includes zero small schools or mid-major overachievers? A Big Dance with no Cinderella—no Loyola, no VCU? A tournament without a basketball-centric power from outside the football oligarchy—no Gonzaga, no Butler, no UConn?

It would stink.

So be careful what you wish for if you're embracing a break from the NCAA. Change is overdue, change is needed and change is on the way. But some solutions might create problems worse than the ones we've been dealing with for years. □

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GAMEPLAN: THE SMART FAN'S GUIDE TO RIGHT NOW

PAT ANSWER

HOW WAS THE GREATEST DYNASTY IN THE NFL BUILT? A NEW BOOK TAKES A DEEP DIVE

DAVID E. KLUTHO [BRADY]

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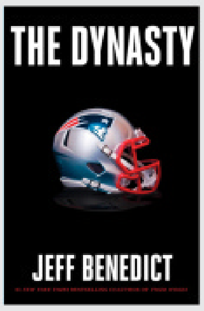
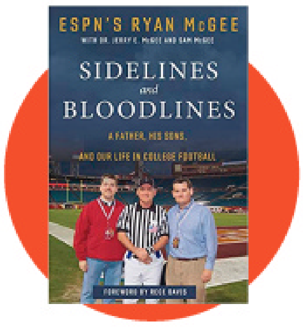


THE DYNASTY By Jeff Benedict
There's been no shortage of books (and TV docs) on the Patriots of late. The latest tome (and at 592 pages, it's a hefty one) is from Jeff Benedict, and it ties all the story lines together, beginning with Robert Kraft's purchase of the moribund team in 1994. Benedict, who interviewed more than 250 people for the book, does more than rehash old tales. He describes the key moment: Kraft's negotiations with Jets owner Leon Hess in 1997 over Bill Parcells. Hess informs Kraft that he's faced tougher situations; when he dealt with oil suppliers in the Middle East they would often begin talks by putting a gun on the table. Unbeknownst to him, Kraft has similar experience of his own: He took on Ayatollah Khomeini when the Iranian leader tried to seize Kraft's manufacturing plant. Kraft's ensuing win at the bargaining table ultimately lands him Belichick, and sends this entertaining, sprawling saga on its way. *—Mark Bechtel*



READ

SIDELINES AND BLOODLINES
By Ryan McGee

While Jeff Benedict's book looks at the biggest story in the football universe, Ryan McGee's examines one far smaller. For more than 35 years his father, Jerry, was a college football official, working two Rose Bowls and three games that decided the national championship. ESPN senior writer McGee—who cowrote the book with his dad and younger brother, Sam—spent his first game on the sidelines when he was 13, wielding a camera he got for Christmas. (He got run over during the game-deciding play.) "That's how we learned the game of football, watching from field level as our father made split-second decisions on Saturdays," McGee writes. "It's a childhood of Xs and Os." Filled with anecdotes from his dad's career, the book is, more importantly, an affecting reminder of how football can bring a family together in good times and bad. —M.B.

FLYING BLIND

THE ONLY CONSTANT IN THIS FAN-LESS BASEBALL SEASON HAS BEEN NONSTOP IMPROVISING. DON'T EXPECT IT TO LET UP

BRAD MANGIN

BY TOM VERDUCCI

THE ROAD from here to the World Series for Major League Baseball is a journey with no navigation system through thick nighttime fog: Looking too far down the road is futile, and the route is likely to be circuitous.

Reacting to COVID-19 outbreaks among the Marlins and Cardinals, MLB invented seven-inning games for doubleheaders, boosted September and postseason rosters from 26 players to 28 and shuffled 23 games involving 12 teams like a deck of cards—and that was just in the first two weeks in *A Season at the Improv.*

Keeping players and staff safe amid a global pandemic was the guiding force behind the 101-page operations manual that MLB and the players association drafted in June—protocols that were tightened after the outbreaks. The ultimate goals: to crown a champion and to collect $1 billion in television money from an expanded postseason. "There is no way the owners want to shut the season down, not with $1 billion sitting there at the end," says one agent. "They won't. And the players are on board. They want to play."

To work through, around and within COVID-19, the regular season had to be compromised. It will continue to be compromised as needed. The Marlins, for instance, are scheduled to play 27 games in the final 23 days, including one 10-day stretch with four doubleheaders.

Playoff spots could be decided by the winning percentages of teams without a like number of games. MLB intends to start the postseason on Sept. 29. That's where the real money is (almost two-thirds of all national TV revenue) as well as the real meaning (see 1994, the strike year without a World Series being a dumpster fire compared with 1981, a strike year with one).

The postseason had been worth $787 million until the expansion from 10 to 16 teams—which raises the maximum possible clinching games (the better-rated ones) from 26 to 40—added another digit to the take. Players agreed to the format on a one-year basis, though the sides will discuss adopting it long term.

Getting to a World Series clincher is so important you could see more improvisation in the postseason. Take travel, for instance. The Marlins' and Cardinals' outbreaks happened while the teams were on the road. Why have teams fly coast to coast, perhaps twice within a series, when for safety it was avoided as much as possible in the regular season? No teams are playing in front of their home fans, anyway.

Imagine weather-friendly venues, as in the World Baseball Classic, for the LCS and World Series, such as Anaheim and San Diego, or Arlington and Houston. Or imagine a World Series between the Dodgers and Yankees with no games at Dodger Stadium or Yankee Stadium, but all played in one, neutral park—in effect, a postseason bubble.

The Fall Classic is scheduled to wrap the last week of October. In the Fog of COVID-19, that is many miles and many improvisations away. ☐

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NEWSMAKERS

ROCK ON!

THE XFL WAS THROWN A LIFELINE WHEN IT WAS PURCHASED BY DWAYNE JOHNSON—AND HIS EX-WIFE, WHO CAME UP WITH THE IDEA

▸ BY DAN GARTLAND

DWAYNE (THE ROCK) Johnson may have garnered the headlines when his group purchased the XFL ahead of a scheduled bankruptcy auction. But his ex-wife and business partner, Dany Garcia *(right)*, was the one who presented him with the idea to purchase the shuttered league. Garcia—a former Merrill Lynch associate vice president who now runs her own investment firm—and Johnson were married from 1997 to 2007. In ’08, she became his business manager.

▸**SPORTS ILLUSTRATED:** *How did the XFL come up on your radar?*
DANY GARCIA: First of all, I’m a huge football fan. Dwayne is a huge football fan. I’m a professional bodybuilder. Sports are a part of who we are, and the storytelling around it is just part of our ethos. So when Vince [McMahon] relaunched the XFL this year, I was extremely excited. I actually was an avid fan right from the start. I ordered a ridiculous amount of merchandise. I was also envious. I wished we had been in that conversation right at the beginning. In May, I called Dwayne and I said, “We have something really big and very, very important to do. Would you like to do this with me?”

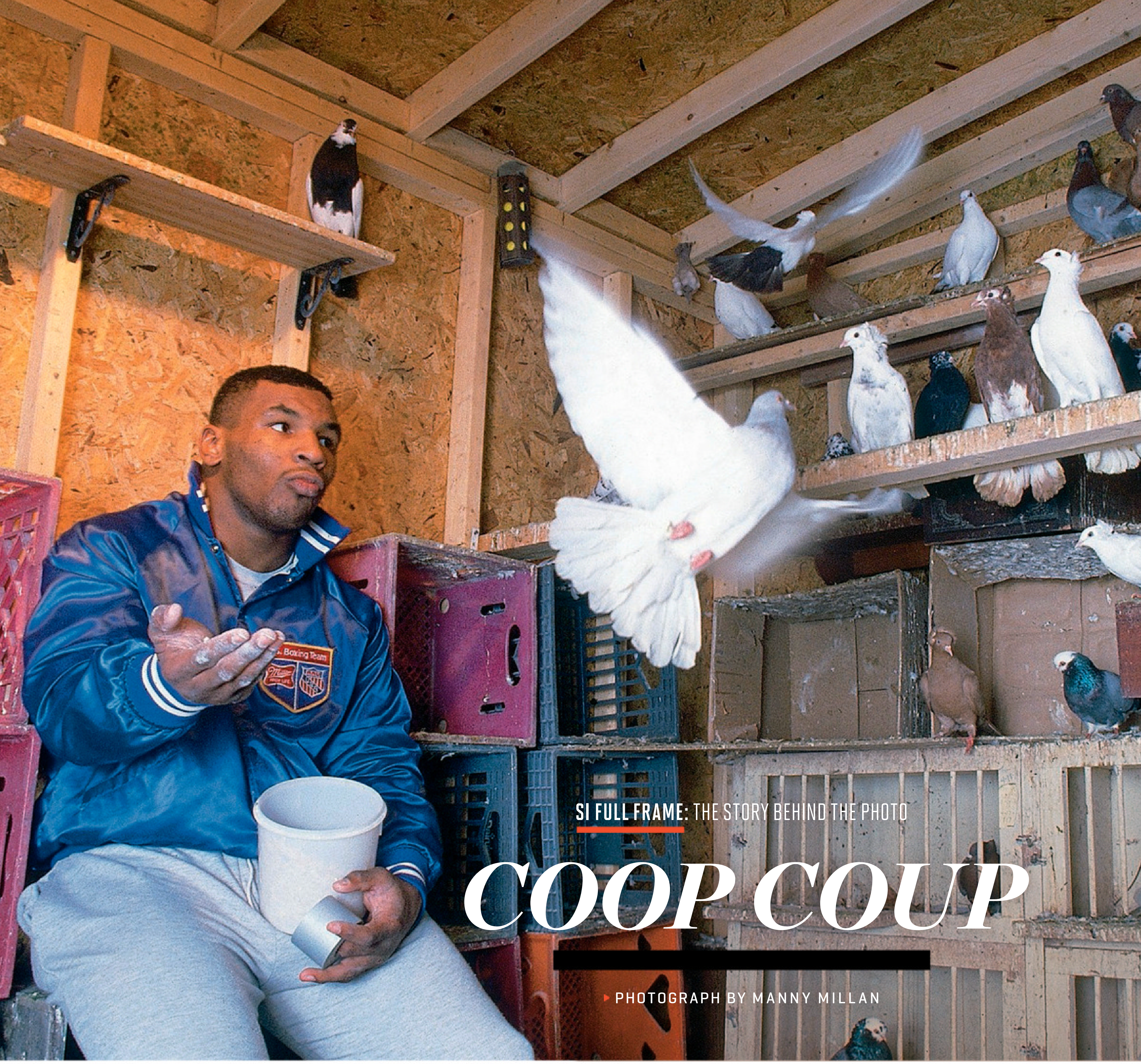
▸**SI:** *Was there something in particular that got you excited about the opportunity to buy the XFL?*
DG: There were so many things. I was so impressed with the quality of play. I was very impressed with the production of the product. I loved the new rules. I thought the XFL did a wonderful job of breaking the barrier between the athlete and fan and allowing you to have that real sense of ownership.

When you go to the NFL—and I love the NFL and their athletes—that’s fantastic, [but] they’re all premium. The XFL represents a journey that people can relate to, and I think that’s really important. Our athletes—as we’re growing, they’re going to grow.

▸**SI:** *There are two female team presidents in the league. And now you’re the first woman to own a stake in an entire sports league. How important is that to you?*
DG: It’s incredible. I wish I was the 20th. A lot of times, I’m putting my head down and moving forward to do what I think is the best thing possible to make an impact. But moments like this, you need to stop and say, “Oh my gosh.” I’m in a milestone moment . . . and social conversations are really, really important now. So this moment can be a moment for so many people. I’m honored to be in this position.

▸**SI:** *What does the future hold for the XFL?*
DG: Expansion. Expansion and more storytelling. Those five weeks the league had made an impact. It would be incredible to see even more teams. □

SCOTT TAETSCH/GETTY IMAGES (ACTION); ALBERT L. ORTEGA/GETTY IMAGES (GARCIA)



SI FULL FRAME: THE STORY BEHIND THE PHOTO

COOP COUP

▸ PHOTOGRAPH BY MANNY MILLAN

WHEN MANNY MILLAN was 14, the superintendent of his apartment building on Manhattan's Lower East Side was sent to jail for a few weeks. Before he went away, he asked Millan to look after his pigeons. That came in handy decades later, when he got an assignment from SI to photograph an up-and-coming 19-year-old fighter in upstate New York named Mike Tyson.

Millan spent time with Tyson (who, at age 54, is fighting Roy Jones Jr. in an exhibition on Nov. 28 in Carson, Calif.) in late 1985, tagging along on trips to the gym, barbershop and supermarket. But some of the most memorable images came in a place no one had ever shot: his pigeon coop. "He said he didn't allow anyone in it," Millan says of the special access.

The two swapped stories about pigeons. (Millan made Tyson howl with a tale of how enraged his super became when he found out one of his birds had gotten sick while he was in the pen.) "That was the beginning of the relationship," says Millan. "I came back another time and I brought a couple of pigeons as a gift. They're called fancies. He was fond of those."

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WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

SLIMMING HOPES

TWENTY YEARS AFTER PULLING OFF ONE OF THE BIGGEST UPSETS IN OLYMPIC HISTORY, WRESTLER RULON GARDNER IS MOTIVATING KIDS, CLIENTS—AND HIMSELF

BY MITCH GOLDICH

RULON GARDNER knows he may look a bit silly in the driver's seat of his 2006 Volkswagen Beetle. As he zips up I-15 through Provo, Utah, weaving around trucks so as not to be late for wrestling practice, he may be the biggest human on the highway, packed into one of the tiniest vehicles. But he just loves that little red car, with the odometer approaching 300,000.

Gardner is strong enough to handle the steering wheel with two thick fingers and a thumb. Gus, his 14-year-old Shih Tzu, sits atop his left shoulder, watching the traffic through the cracked windshield. "My parrot," Gardner jokes.

The Bug has logged a lot of miles, and is in some ways the worse for the wear, but it just never seems to quit. It has a lot in common with the guy manhandling the wheel.

MAT METTLE

Four of Gardner's Herriman High wrestlers competed in Utah's state tournament, and two brought home championships.

GABRIEL MAYBERRY

Gardner is keeping busy at 48. Maybe not quite as busy as when he grew up on a farm in Wyoming, milking cows and carrying irrigation pipe from sunup to sundown. But he has a full-time job selling insurance and gives speeches across the country—and 20 years after pulling off the greatest upset in Olympic wrestling history, Gardner is chasing more medals. That's why he's in the tiny car on his way to Herriman High, where he has been head coach since the 2018–19 season.

Gardner still feels his match against Aleksander Karelin every day. No, not that match. Not the Olympic Greco-Roman heavyweight final in 2000 when, with a 1–0 decision, he handed the Russian Bear his first loss in 13 years, and scored the first point against him in six. His body reminds him of the first time they wrestled, the semifinals at the 1997 world championships, when Karelin dropped Gardner on his head and broke two bones in his neck. Gardner stretches constantly. He'll be standing there, then suddenly, and violently, whip his neck sideways in one direction, then the other. A tic that offers temporary relief.

It's one in a long line of injuries. Most famously, Gardner spent a February 2002 night in the Wyoming wilderness after his snowmobile overturned and dunked him in an icy river multiple times. The frostbitten night in the mountains cost him his right middle toe, after which he recovered to win a bronze medal in Athens in 2004—a feat that's as much a part of his legacy as the gold in Sydney.

It's fitting that Gardner's day job is selling insurance. Think about the industry in TV commercials: from Allstate telling you to prepare for mayhem, to State Farm handling a series of calamities at Chris Paul's house, to Farmers dealing with any nightmare scenario J.K. Simmons can conjure up. And who's seen more accidents than Rulon Gardner?

His family barn burned down when he was a kid. Before the 2004 Olympic Trials he was in a motorcycle accident and then dislocated his right wrist punching the bleachers after losing his cool during a pickup basketball game. Three years later he walked away from a plane crash in Lake Powell with only a minor hip injury and a concussion. His coworker at JRI Insurance, Lydia Woltjen, jokes that she's always sure to wear a seatbelt when Gardner is driving.

JRI has a branch in Payson, 60 miles south of Salt Lake City, about a 50-minute drive from Herriman. The office sits in a strip of brick storefronts, and the front door opens to a wall of pristine, snowcapped mountains. Gardner, who lives alone, bought a house nearby, so his only long commute is up I-15 to the high school.

Gardner, of course, cuts a hulking figure at JRI. Wearing a dry-fit, long-sleeve black athletic shirt, gray slacks and black sneakers, he sits behind a desk that has nothing on it but a binder, a notebook and a red Powerade Zero Sugar. Items from his vast memorabilia collection line the shelves on the walls. He has a torch from the 2002 Salt Lake City Games, which he got to carry in the relay right before his snowmobile accident. He stares at a row of signed baseballs and muses that he threw the ceremonial first pitch at a 2000 playoff game in Yankee Stadium to José Canseco, so one of them is probably signed by him. The memories and Sharpie ink fade with time.

GARDNER, WHO graduated from Nebraska in 1996 with a degree in physical education, passed the tests required to get his insurance license in 2018. JRI handles all types of policies, and he's become well-versed in home, health, life, auto, property and casualty.

On this day in February, a potential new client comes in for what Gardner calls a one-on-one. It's more of a one-on-two. The client takes a seat facing Gardner's desk, and Woltjen sits in his chair while he stands behind her. He schmoozes, telling stories and jokes before Woltjen steers things back toward business. Gardner alternately calls Woltjen, who has years of experience working in the Utah State Insurance Department, the brains and the muscle of the operation. "I'm the eye candy," Gardner jokes. "It's sour, but it's still candy." He asks the client to share some of his corporate financial goals, and Woltjen gives the pitch about what services they can offer.

One client leaves, and it's on to the next one. They relocate to Woltjen's desk in the main entryway. Gardner stands and leans against her desk, hovering above a speakerphone, clicking his pen as they discuss auto insurance quotes for a father who wants to buy a car for his teenage son who's already been in a fender bender.

COURTESY OF RULON GARDNER

"Even though it was one of the things that almost killed me, it was truly amazing," Gardner says of the snowmobile accident. "Because the human body and the human mind can overcome anything."

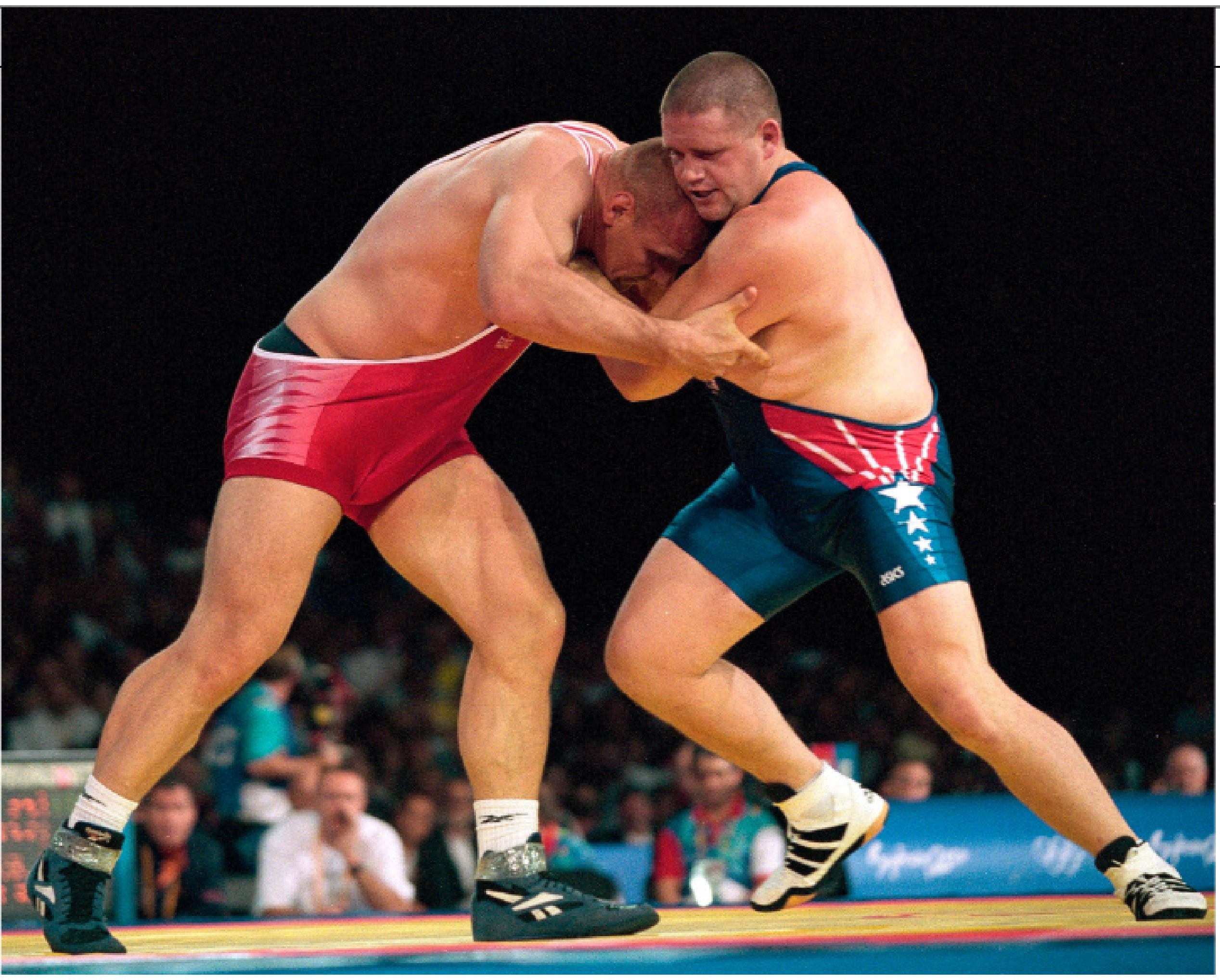
It's an interesting twist, being both the new guy and the celebrity. Gardner certainly has no problem using his name to draw people in. He's printed off an endless supply of glossies. On one side, there's the Olympic referee raising a triumphant Gardner's hand as Karelin scowls with a hand on his hip; on the other, all of his professional contact info and a list of insurance brands JRI hawks.

Another client comes out of a meeting with one of Gardner's coworkers, and on the way out the door he spots the heavyweight. "Oh, do you know who he is?" the coworker asks his client. And Gardner is right back into the same conversation he's had countless times over the last 20 years.

The company is accommodating of his schedule. In a normal year, not interrupted by a pandemic, the high school wrestling season runs from November to February. After that it's club season until April, followed by tournaments and clinics through the summer—not to mention Gardner's numerous speaking engagements nationwide, talking about his Seven Steps to Success, posing for photo after photo (typically holding the 2004 bronze medal and letting his admirers hold the gold) and recording motivational messages into high school coaches' phones.

The company also has no issue with him spending two weekdays at the state championships in February. Consider it client recruitment, with Coach Rulon happily passing along his fliers to a stream of coaches, parents, tournament officials and others eager to chat him up between matches at the tournament, where the four Herriman wrestlers competing will win two titles.

THE LAST dozen years or so have not always been as kind to Gardner as that brief stretch after he became famous overnight. Many of the headlines written about him since 2012 focused on his bankruptcy filing, when he was the victim of a fraud case. (Gardner, who gave the niece of a friend about $250,000 as part of a bogus real estate scam, is owed hundreds of thousands of dollars in restitution, but he gets $50 a month—enough for about a tank and a half of gas in his Beetle.)



POINT TAKEN

Before Gardner's historic win, Karelin [in red] had shut out his opponents for six straight years.

BOB MARTIN (2)

He was once so strapped for cash that he handed his medals over to a friend, later reacquiring them when he was able to repay the loan. There was also an appearance on *The Biggest Loser* in 2011, when he showed up at 474 pounds, up more than 200 from his 2004 Olympic weight. The next year, a slimmer Gardner mounted a comeback attempt for the London Games, but his bid fell short, the result of the 40-year-old not being able to make weight on the day of the Olympic Trials.

Gardner's weight is still an issue. The night before the state tournament, he stopped at a buffet restaurant for dinner. He says he loves the salad bar, but other temptations abound. "Welcome back," a man on the waitstaff said, as Gardner made his way to a table. "Welcome back?" Gardner chuckled, after he'd left, and he made a face that said: *busted*. But he's a recognizable face, and several diners came up to tell Gardner that they were fans or that he was an inspiration.

How much does he weigh now? Gardner won't say. He was willing to answer questions about anything—frostbite, bankruptcy, divorce—but not that. He says he's probably about where he started on *Loser*, just a dumbbell shy of 500.

Gardner made another brief comeback attempt before the 2016 Rio Games, at 44. Part of the reason, he concedes, was because nothing helped him keep his weight down like wrestling. When he was an active athlete, he never took a day off.

Gardner's life in the public eye has been a twisting journey of highs and lows. When asked, just before the coronavirus pandemic, what advice he would give to somebody at a low point right now, he replied, "You can say I'm stupid or I'm stubborn because I think anything is possible. Keep going. Keep pushing. I'm at a low point now"—though he has seemed upbeat all week about his job, about his coaching, about his life—"[because] my biggest thing is my weight. I don't feel good about it. I'm not happy about it. The one person that can change it is me.

"You see people that do amazing things, and they sit back and they think that they're just gonna keep succeeding because of that." But he knows it's not always that easy. "Today I'm not the person I want to be," he continues. "The person I should be."

The sun is starting to set. Gardner doesn't expect to sleep much tonight. It's Feb. 14 and 18 years to the day since he lost his toe. He has a tradition that on the anniversary he watches the time pass and reflects on what he was doing, hour by hour, on that fateful night.

"It was one of the coolest experiences of my life," he says. "Even though it was one of the things that almost killed me, it was truly amazing. Because the human body and the human mind can overcome anything."

When he looks back on the match that first made him a household name, he draws inspiration from Karelin. Gardner says he remembers the final second, when both wrestlers knew it was over: "To see him put his head down and feel loss . . . [I felt] happiness, but also sorrow. It lets us all know that we're not untouchable." □

VIDEO SPOTLIGHT
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FACES IN THE CROWD

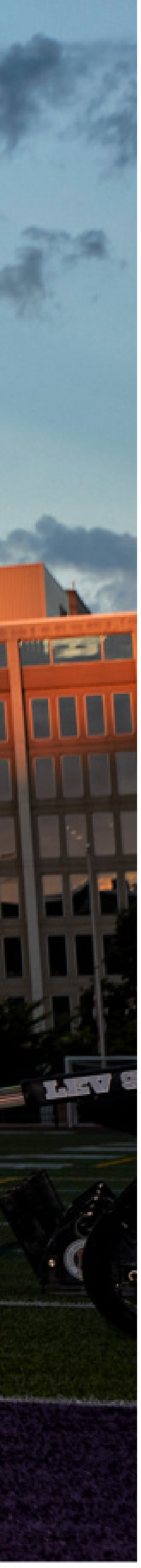
▸ *Edited by* **DAN FALKENHEIM** ▸ *Photograph by* **SIMON BRUTY**

CALEB WILLIAMS

Hometown: **Washington, D.C.**
School: **Gonzaga College High**
Sport: **Football**
Born: **Nov. 18, 2002**
SI All-American Ranking: **No. 1**

▸ **BAKER MAYFIELD**. Kyler Murray. Jalen Hurts. Now following suit: Caleb Williams, a rising senior quarterback at Gonzaga College High in Washington, D.C. who officially committed to Oklahoma on July 4 and will next fall join Spencer Rattler in coach Lincoln Riley's cavalcade of quarterbacks. The top-ranked dual-threat QB in the recruiting class of 2021, Caleb forged his connection with Riley during an early two-hour visit. "I think he's an offensive mastermind," he says of Riley. "He's gotten his past three quarterbacks to the NFL."

After beating out two juniors to earn the starting job as a freshman, Caleb guided the Eagles to the Washington Catholic Athletic Conference title game, where they lost 30–7 to St. John's College High.



The next season he brought Gonzaga back to the final. Trailing DeMatha Catholic 43–40 with 15 seconds left, Caleb connected with senior receiver John Marshall on a 53-yard Hail Mary, giving the Eagles their fourth WCAC championship and first since 2002. "It's pretty cool that I'm the only African American quarterback who started as a freshman at Gonzaga *and* won a championship," Caleb says.

That season he earned D.C.'s Gatorade Player of the Year honors after throwing for 2,624 yards, rushing for 394 yards and scoring 36 total touchdowns. As a junior Caleb led Gonzaga to an 8–3 record, with 1,770 yards passing, 838 yards rushing and 37 touchdowns.

Caleb protested for justice with his teammates in late spring. On July 1, he was named MVP of the Elite 11 Finals, a national QB competition. Three days later Murray congratulated the future Sooner on his commitment, tweeting "best of the best." "*That* was pretty cool," says Caleb. —*Kevin Parrish*

UPDATE

FOUR BIDDING

WHEN SHE appeared in the Feb. 25, 2019, edition of FACES IN THE CROWD, Grambling State senior point guard Shakyla Hill had become the first Division I player, male or female, to record a second quadruple double. The 5' 7" Hill, from Little Rock, went undrafted by the WNBA in April 2019 and six months later began her pro career in Serbia, with ŽKK Kraljevo. In her 14th game she pulled off her distinctive feat again—for the first time in the league's 15-year history—with 15 points, 10 rebounds, 11 assists and 11 steals in a victory over ŽKK Partizan. "The day before that game, I cried," Hill says. "Too far away from home, nobody to come to my games. That's one of those 'trust the process'-type moments." Hill led Kraljevo to a 17–1 finish and the club's first regular-season championship with 13.3 points, 8.1 boards and a team-high 6.1 assists per game.

—*Madeline Coleman*

DIAMOND JOHNSON ▸Sport: **Basketball** ▸Hometown: **Philadelphia**

Diamond, a recently graduated 5' 5" point guard for Neumann Goretti High, averaged 31.0 points, 5.7 rebounds, 3.5 assists and 3.6 steals in 27 games and finished her career with 2,812 points, a Philadelphia record for boys and girls. A Rutgers signee, she became the first woman to be chosen for the men's All-American Game at the Iverson Classic 24K Showcase.

JOSLIN BLAIR ▸Sport: **Trail Running** ▸Hometown: **Eagle, Colo.**

Joslin, a recent graduate of Eagle Valley High, defended her national championship by running the 5.4-mile course in Salida, Colo., in a record 37:29.29. In 2018 she took gold at the World Mountain Running Association International Youth Cup. Joslin will race for Vanderbilt.

NOMINATE NOW

To submit a candidate for Faces in the Crowd, email **faces@si.com**

KEN MURRAY/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES (UPDATE); COURTESY OF ANDREA PETERSON (JOHNSON); COURTESY OF MYRIAH BLAIR (BLAIR)

KELCE
Spectrum | RE

Bro

THE KELCES—CHIEFS TIGHT END TRAVIS AND EAGLES CENTER JASON
THEM BETTER PLAYERS—AND WHEN THEY INFLUENCE EACH OTHER, GOOD

Nat

ther

—ARE THE MOST ACCOMPLISHED SIBLINGS IN THE NFL. THEIR BOND HAS MADE THINGS HAPPEN. JUST ASK THE TEAMS THEY'VE LED TO SUPER BOWL TITLES

KELCE
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7
EFS WIN
ART

FACE TIME
After Travis scored the go-ahead touchdown in Kansas City's win over Philadelphia in 2017, he lovingly rubbed it in on Jason.

BY **ROBERT O'CONNELL**

JAY BIGGERSTAFF/USA TODAY SPORTS

ure

THE KELCE BROTHERS DISAGREE.

GREG NELSON

In a Zoom call days before training camps get underway, Jason, the Eagles' 10th-year center (positionally and spiritually), recounts the good fortune he's had to play most of his NFL life in Andy Reid's and Doug Pederson's inventive offenses, which have allowed him, at a relatively light weight, to serve as a roving fulcrum rather than a straight-ahead masher. "If I was on 25 other teams in the league, trying to run the plays that they're running," he says, "I'd probably be an average-at-best center."

Travis, the all-everything tight end for the Chiefs, is having none of his older brother's modesty. "He's gonna find a way to have success," Travis says. "He's a tricky sumbitch now. Don't get it twisted. He knows how to play this game. And if it was a different style of game, he'd figure that one out too."

The fraternal resemblance between the two would be apparent even to anyone unfamiliar with their on-field exploits—vast jawline; hull of a forehead; scanning, football-schooled eyes—but, even beyond this small bit of sibling contrarianism, they broadcast vibes all their own. During the coronavirus pandemic Jason has settled into his preferred look: a dark and stately mullet, shoulder-length, balances a beard that could absorb a head butt from a nosetackle; aggressively unkempt eyebrows reside in between. Travis, who in the days before the call has run through a standard-for-him gamut of *GQ* and *TMZ* cameos, is cleaned up, his hair cropped in close waves at the top and buzzed tight at the sides. His own beard, light brown, is manicured and oiled. He wears looped, diamond-studded earrings.

"I just let him do his thing and watch from a distance," Jason says of Travis's fondness for the trappings of NFL fame: He has recently partied preshow with Post Malone and celebrated Kansas City quarterback Patrick Mahomes's record contract extension on a boat in Lake Tahoe. The brothers recall Travis's short-lived E! dating show, 2016's *Catching Kelce*; it took a substantial amount of persuasion to coax Jason into making just a couple of on-screen appearances. "Even as he was on the show," Travis recalls, "it was just kind of like, *Dude, you're an idiot*." Jason jumps in with a loving concession: "Yeah, it ended up being a lot of fun, though."

With apologies to the Watts, the Kelces stand as the most accomplished siblings in the NFL. Since 2011, Jason's rookie season, the two have garnered a total of eight Pro Bowl appearances and five All-Pro nods. Travis, 30, already has the league record for most consecutive 1,000-yard seasons by a tight end, with four; as the too-big-too-fast trump card in the Chiefs' offensive hand, he's a safe bet to add more. The 32-year-old Jason, who

REID ALL ABOUT THEM
The TD-grabbing Travis and the ever-locked-in Jason credit their success to the same coach.

SCOTT TAETSCH/GETTY IMAGES

makes up for being 6' 3" and not-quite-300 pounds by running a 4.89 40, has been Pro Football Focus's top-ranked center the past three years. The brothers have suffered only three losing records in a combined 18 seasons (all Jason's). They've won two of the last three Super Bowls.

Each is adored in his city, and each is widely understood as the inverse of the other. Jason: cutthroat, spotlight-averse, selfless in the extreme. Travis: chatty, flashy, lavishly gifted. But if the shorthand is accurate enough for pregame TV fodder on Sundays, when the two make for convenient avatars for their teams' broader identities, it also obscures a more layered relationship. The brothers share a profound belief in what makes up winning football—passion, leadership, curiosity, smarts, love—and each contends he wouldn't have found his championship formula without the other.

SEVEN SEASONS in, Travis has successfully distanced himself from the antics of his early professional career, when sparkling plays—shutter-quick breaks in post and dig routes, highly improbable midair adjustments—were too often negated by taunting and excessive celebration penalties. "All the negatives, the flags for the personal fouls and silly stuff after the play, that takes a toll," he says. "People don't want to be a part of that." But he's not all p.r.-approved smoothed edges. His quarantine pastimes included "a lot of virtual beer pong," he says, laughing. "I picked up that hobby all over again." Travis acknowledges, with arch seriousness, that the lack of in-person refereeing means the particulars of distance and elbow placement are beholden to an honor code. "It's a gentleman's game."

Jason spent his offseason in Philadelphia, training at team headquarters, and with his wife, Kylie, caring for their 10-month-old daughter, Wyatt. He speaks of the difficulties 2020 has posed to each undertaking. The Kelces' mother, Donna, had to stay home in Orlando during the spring due to COVID-19, and when she visited Philly in the early summer months with Travis, who arranged a private flight, the family did what everyone else did: stayed in, ordered takeout, reminisced about normalcy. (Ed, the Kelces' father, lives in Philadelphia; the couple divorced in 2011 but remain friendly.) And while Jason's status as an injured player allowed him access to the Eagles' facilities—a silver lining to a recent spate of elbow, knee and foot issues—he missed the camaraderie and tempo of normal activities. "The building is completely empty," he says. "You don't get to interact with teammates, you don't get to interact with coaches, you don't have that."

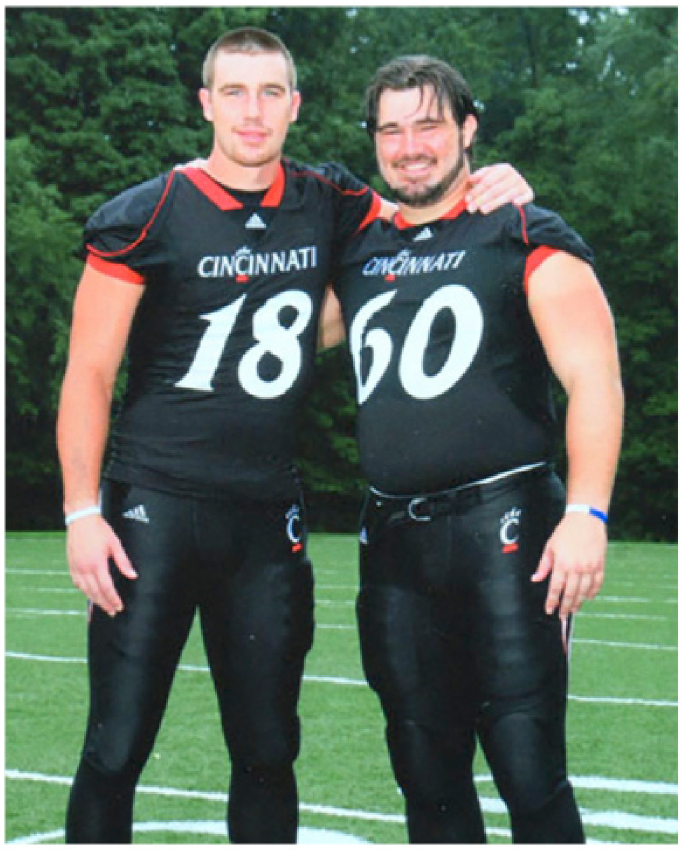
As kids growing up in Cleveland Heights, Ohio, where Ed sold steel and Donna worked in banking, the Kelce boys were constant raucous companions, both teammates and rivals. They smashed lacrosse balls against basement walls and hockey pucks into the garage door. When they weren't destroying their home, Travis tailed Jason around the neighborhood, taking part in pickup football and basketball games against a brother two years older, many pounds heavier and disinclined to take it easy. "There were a lot of fights," says Donna. "There were a lot of punches thrown. It all just stemmed from somebody being better than the other one, and the other one not being able to deal with it."

At Cleveland Heights High, neither played the position he would eventually star in as a pro: Jason was a linebacker, Travis a quarterback. In the winters, Travis played basketball and Jason hockey. Ed claims both boys' best sport was baseball. Asked for a comparison for Jason, he replies, "You heard of Thurman Munson?"

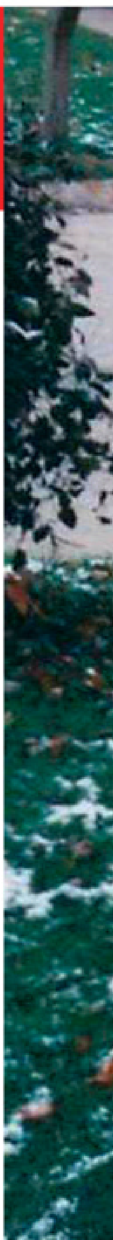
Jason walked on as a linebacker at Cincinnati, transitioned to O-lineman and earned a scholarship. Slotting in alongside future NFL blockers Jeff Likenbach and Trevor Canfield, he helped push the Bearcats to their first three double-digit-win seasons in school history. "He was a wonderful example of effort, intensity, and passion: for the game, for his teammates, for victory," says Kerry Coombs, Cincinnati's defensive backs coach at the time. "If you're going across the street and getting in a fight, you're taking Jason with you." Travis, the more eye-poppingly athletic of the two, followed his brother to UC two seasons later as a wildcat quarterback and tight end.

In 2009, at the end of Travis's redshirt freshman year, he failed a test for recreational drugs before the Sugar Bowl. When Butch Jones arrived to coach the team the following year, he dismissed Travis from the program, citing a need to overhaul the culture. His housing revoked, Travis had nowhere to live, so Jason brought him into a place he shared with teammates. Travis spent the 2010 season administering phone surveys, gauging public support for the Affordable Care Act. Donna took out loans to pay for his textbooks.

OHIO PLAYERS
At Cincinnati and, in 1993, as kids in Cleveland Heights, Jason (60, below, and 19) kept the younger Travis close.



"I NEVER ASKED HIM HOW HE GOT ME BACK ON THE TEAM," SAYS TRAVIS OF JASON, WHO VOUCHED FOR HIS BROTHER IN COLLEGE.



Coombs remembers Jason walking into a coaches' meeting that season, tears in his eyes. He was there to stake his substantial reputation on getting his brother back in the fold, and he came armed with a straightforward argument. "Basically, it was, *I've got this, and you've got to trust me on this*," Coombs says. "You're talking about a man who had earned the right to give his word and have his word listened to."

"I never really asked him how he got me back on the team," Travis says. But he returned for his junior season in 2011 as a full-time tight end and made the dean's list that fall—"which was unheard of," according to Ed. In '12, Travis broke out, catching 45 passes for 722 yards and eight touchdowns; the following spring, the Chiefs drafted him in the third round. "That was my brother just being a big brother," Travis says, "looking out for me every step of the way and fighting for the success story."

Jason deflects credit. "[Travis] wasn't a bad kid," he says of the Cincinnati dismissal. "I fully anticipated him being fine." He sees Travis's success not as evidence of his own mentorship but as a simple byproduct of talent—a reading that fits a general preference to talk football, not the other stuff. Both brothers brighten when asked about on-field specifics; both glow when asked about each other.

"Jason thinks like a defensive coordinator," Travis says. "He was a linebacker, so when he made the transition to offense, he was a step ahead. He knows where guys have to fill the gaps. He understands how a defensive line moves, if the defense rotates this way, in the back end they have to do the opposite. . . . There's certain things that register in his mind that I—I'm amazed, when I see on film."

"I think skill-position players are better when they're artistically inclined," Jason says of Travis. He slips into a story from their childhood: Ed bought both boys the

COURTESY OF THE KELCE FAMILY (2)

same Lego set, and where Jason followed the instructions to a T, Travis simply looked at the outside of the box and followed his intuition. “You have to know how to create within space, especially when you’re working by yourself. His ability to understand spacing, to have an instinct to know when to cut, when he feels somebody approaching him to make a spin move, to juke to get extra yards—that’s what I think really makes him special, besides the fact that he’s 6' 5" and an athletic freak.” Jason pauses, considering how to temper the string of compliments. “I would never call him a genius off the field, but he is a genius at knowing how to operate and how to use his physicality.”

Recent NFL history would likely look far different if not for the peculiarities of the Kelce football gene. The ascent of backup quarterback Nick Foles grabbed headlines after the 2018 Super Bowl, but it was Jason’s brutal precision against the Patriots’ defensive scheme that kept Foles upright. He cleared space for 164 yards of rushing offense; he detected and blew up the Belichickian stunts that made up New England’s pass rush. A clip that circulated after the game showed Jason helping on a double team on the right side of the line and then, as if seeing through the back of his helmet, spotting a blitzing linebacker looping into the backfield. Jason peeled off, doubled back and picked him up at the last second; Foles was never touched.

Two years later Travis played a similarly crucial—if more telegenic—role for the Chiefs as they became the first team to roll off three consecutive double-digit playoff comebacks en route to a championship. In the AFC divisional round game against the Texans, which began with K.C.’s offense sputtering as Houston grabbed a 24–0 lead, he commandeered the middle of the field, hauling in 10 Mahomes passes for 134 yards and three scores while the Chiefs ripped off seven consecutive touchdown drives. Afterward, Travis offered a succinct explanation of how he helped engineer one of the biggest come-from-behind wins in postseason history: “When in doubt, make plays.”

CLEVELAND
19
BROWNS
CLEVELAND
19
BROWNS

ATHLETICISM AND strategic acuity—the ability to spot and then adjust to a blitzing linebacker, the awareness to time a break with a safety’s misplaced cleat—are of secondary importance to the Kelces. The point of football is one and the same as the means of succeeding at it: committing yourself completely, body and intellect and spirit, to a team. When he tries to define the Chiefs’ championship makeup, Travis loads clichéd sentiments with the force of true belief. “When everyone plays and has passion for each other, man, that’s when you really have a chance to be great as a team. Without it, I don’t know how football even works,” he says. “If you don’t care about the guy next to you, one, you’re a terrible teammate. Two, you’re never gonna win.”

Jason is a born field general. “He was just a nasty, dirty mother hover,” says Jeff Rotsky, who played against Jason in high school and later coached Travis. Rotsky describes a player who would light into his teammates at halftime but, during the game, avenge any after-the-whistle hits or blindside blocks on them in short order. “He controlled their team. He was the unequivocal leader.” Travis’s morale-building is founded on a contagious confidence—he celebrates his teammates’ touchdowns more exuberantly than his own, these days—and shot through with affection. “Travis thought he was never going to lose,” says Coombs. “He didn’t have to be breathing snot out of his nose like Jason, hollering and screaming.”

Over the course of their NFL careers, though, the brothers have borrowed from each other’s tendencies. “Jason has learned to have fun, and Travis has learned to be that consummate professional,” Rotsky says. “They’ve both rubbed off on each other in a really positive way.” The effect of Jason on Travis is more readily apparent; the younger brother’s unsportsmanlike conduct totals have dropped, he was voted a Chiefs captain for the past three postseasons and he can now credibly deliver speeches to young teammates on the importance of offseason training and extra reps. (“It’s technically quarantine, we’re not supposed to be here, we’re not supposed to be there,” he says, with a Jasonian skepticism of excuses. “You have to find a way to get the work in.”)

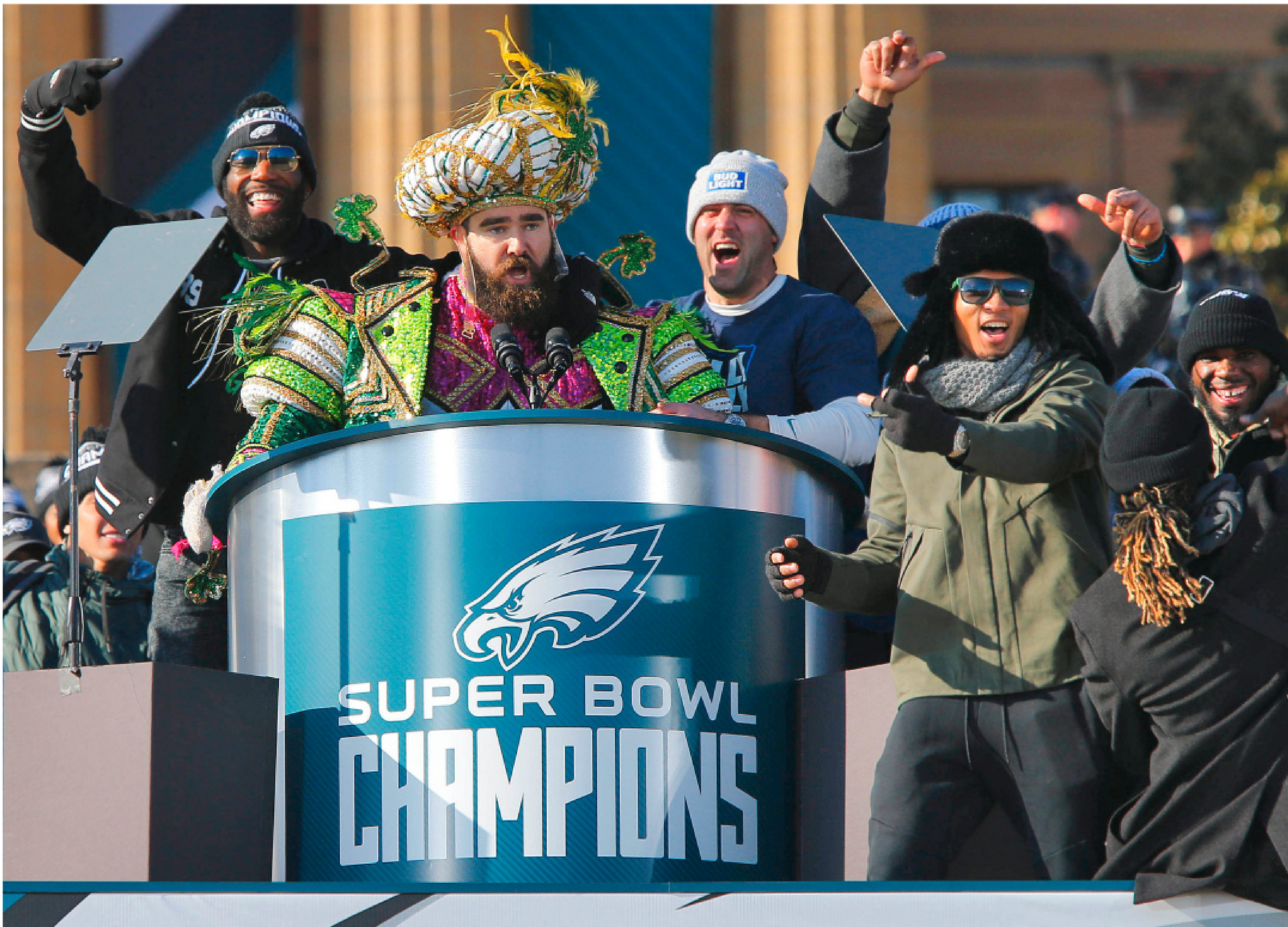
But the effect of Travis on his older brother has been no less substantial. “Sometimes it’s so easy for me to get caught up in my own head, selfishly looking at things from my own perspective, that I forget how important it is to uplift other people,” Jason says. “Not by these rah-rah speeches and not by getting in somebody’s face but just by being a genuinely happy, emotional guy."

The cross-pollination of leadership styles has resulted in, among other things, the Speech. It is part of championship lore in Philadelphia, a stream-of-consciousness, expletive-laden, 5½-minute ode to perceived inferiority and the transformative power of grit. Five days after the 2018 Super Bowl, when the championship celebration ended up on the steps of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Jason strode to the podium dressed (in a nod to the city's famed Mummers Parade) as a rhinestone leprechaun, a green and audaciously lapelled suit on his ample torso and a wrap on his head. He listed the cases against his teammates, and himself. "Stefen Wisniewski ain't good enough, Jason Kelce's too small, Lane Johnson can't lay off the juice, Brandon Brooks has anxiety!" His voice cracked. "You know what I got to say to all those people that doubted us, to all those people who counted us out, and everybody who said that we couldn't get it done?" He pointed into the thicket of increasingly giddy Eagles to his side. "What my man Jay Ajayi said: F--- you!"

The Kelces' parents and former coaches—anyone who has been in a locker room with the brothers—know that version of Jason well, but they also know it rarely appears in public, and they credit his younger brother with loosening Jason up and teaching him the value of a good celebration. Travis is delighted that the world got a glimpse of Jason in full. "I've seen a speech like that hammered. I've seen a speech like that aggressive and angry," he says. "And I've seen a very passionate, loving, big old bear that we know as Jason Kelce, like he was that day for Philly."

THE 21ST-CENTURY NFL has produced two dominant traditions. The first is Bill Belichick's, built on well-guarded institutional knowledge, unbending doctrine and a taste for subterfuge. The other is Andy Reid's, which favors high experimentation and low 40 times. Reid picked Jason in the sixth round of 2011 and coached him for two seasons before Chip Kelly took over; four years later, Reid protégé Pederson picked up where his mentor had left off. In Reid's first year in Kansas City, he selected Travis. On that draft day, Reid reportedly asked Travis to hand the phone over to Jason. "Is he gonna screw this up?" Reid asked. Jason told Reid what he told the staff at Cincinnati: "No, Coach, I got you."

The Kelces are quick to defend each other's skill sets—Jason maintains that Travis, never celebrated for his



CENTER OF GRAVITY?
Philly fans got to see a wilder side of Jason during his profane speech at the 2018 championship parade.

NOAH K. MURRAY/USA TODAY SPORTS

blocking, could be as effective as the 49ers' George Kittle if required—but they admit that the Reid school fits their shared football sensibility perfectly. "What makes Belichick a great defensive coach is what makes Reid a great offensive coach," Jason says. "The best coaches find a way to utilize guys' skill sets and talents. I don't think that I'm necessarily an unbelievable player for every offense, right, but I have a great skill set, and when [Reid and Pederson] utilize that, I can be a very successful player."

Travis, who over his career has gone from K.C.'s primary receiving threat—in his second season he caught five touchdowns; the team's wide receivers caught none—to one in a cadre of downfield targets, refers to Reid's offense as a kind of football nirvana. "Every summer, I'll just pop my head into Coach Reid's office to say hello, and he's got a four-inch stack of notecards," Travis says. "He's just licking his chops, like, *I can't wait to install these babies*." In the fourth quarter of a close game against the Lions last September, Travis caught a 12-yard pass over the middle and, as he was being tackled, lateraled the ball to running back LeSean McCoy, who scampered for an extra 20. It was the sort of risky play that coaches tend to reprimand, even when they work out, and Travis worried about Reid's response. "After the game," Travis says, "he just looked at me: 'Imagine doing that the whole game.' "

EXPRESSIVE CELEBRATION
After beating the 49ers in Super Bowl LIV, Travis knew he'd suffer no penalty for whooping it up.

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CHAMPIONS
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SUPER BOWL
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KC

DAVID E. KLUTHO

In his retelling, there's an echo of the dares the Kelce boys flung at each other growing up. One afternoon, Travis bet Jason that he couldn't throw a football over their three-story home. Jason stationed himself in the front yard; Travis waited to receive in the back. The challenge ended in some stern parental words and a trip to the hardware store for a new pane of glass—how else?—but it also reinforced a sense of sport as possibility. Things can't go right unless you're willing to go all out. And when they go wrong, someone's there to take the heat with you.

"TRAVIS THOUGHT HE WAS NEVER GOING TO LOSE," COOMBS SAYS. "HE DIDN'T BREATHE SNOT OUT OF HIS NOSE, LIKE JASON."

FOOTBALL PLAYERS tend toward low-grade superstition, and the demands of the sport encourage looking forward, not backward, all of which makes them hesitant to talk about their accomplishments. The tendency holds for Jason and Travis; neither is much interested in reminiscing over his own Super Bowl.

Both of them, though, will happily detail their memories of the other's. When Damien Williams scored the Chiefs' final touchdown in February, putting the game out of reach, Jason headed from his seat in the stands down to the field. "I was just running through the stadium, very emotional, crying," he says. "Winning it yourself is a very self-gratifying thing—like, I've worked my entire life to do this—and that has its emotions in its own way, but seeing someone you love and care about accomplish their dreams is potentially more gratifying."

Travis agrees. "The happiest I've ever been for him was seeing him win the Super Bowl and seeing how crazy he went on the field. A guy with so much passion for the people around him, the ultimate leader." He pauses. "It always gets me a little emotional thinking about that."

Donna watched the Eagles' Super Bowl win from a suite with Travis. As the clock wound down, she wondered how her younger son would react, how much envy might cut the vicarious joy. "It was always a competition between the two of them, and that still has not gone away," she says. Travis told her that he was glad Jason got one, but that he wanted the rest. Then the moment got quieter, the first blast of celebration giving way to the settling realization of what Jason had accomplished, and Travis said something else: "I hope my brother stays this happy for the rest of his life." ▢

MAVERICKS 6
13 GEORGE
MAVERICKS 10
GLEICHBERECHTIGUNG 42 KLEBER

TAPPING OUT
Kristaps Porzingis (6) and the Mavericks were a formidable obstacle for Paul George and the Clippers, but L.A. came out on top, 126–111.

Game

ON

UNDER THE WATCHFUL EYE OF COMMISSIONER **ADAM SILVER,** THE NBA GOT OFF TO A FAST START INSIDE ITS FLORIDA BUBBLE, AS THE ON-COURT PLAY—AND THE ON-COURT MESSAGES—RESONATED DEEPLY

BY **CHRIS MANNIX**

FROM BEHIND two inches of plexiglass, a cloth mask covering his face and NBA basketball playing out before his eyes, Adam Silver felt a wave of emotion wash over him. It had been more than four months since the COVID-19 pandemic shut the league down, when Jazz center Rudy Gobert tested positive in Oklahoma City, bringing the game to a screeching halt. Everything that followed—the countless conversations with epidemiologists, the painstaking negotiations with the players union, the barrage of criticism from those who questioned the ethics of a sports league running thousands of rapid-response tests when the surrounding communities struggled to get just one—had led to this, a socially distanced seat for the NBA's reopener, Lakers-Clippers, an L.A. rivalry in central Florida, a marquee event playing out in front of 300 or so virtual fans. "It was a bit overwhelming to see," Silver told SPORTS ILLUSTRATED. "To see our players together playing basketball, that what we had worked through over many months on paper, on our computer screens, had come to life, I'd say it was moving to me."

The NBA bubble isn't really a bubble. It's a quarantined environment spread out over four hotels and three arenas, with some 1,500 people moving around in it. It isn't cheap—the total cost will be around $170 million—but it has worked. As baseball struggles to keep teams healthy and college football crumbles, the NBA restart is humming along. Players, initially leery of a lockdown, have settled into routines. "I really worried about it potentially feeling a little bit like an armed camp," says Michele Roberts, executive director of the NBPA. "I've found that our players are able to relax. I'm very impressed with the work that everyone's done to create this thing."

A few weeks into the restart, Silver spoke to SI about the most challenging season in history.

SI: The bubble—sorry, the campus—is operational. Is it what you hoped it would be?

AS: It's better than what we had envisioned. Players have taken to it in a more spirited way than we thought they would. We knew that this would require enormous sacrifice on everyone's part, but I think that what is hard to calibrate—and this maybe goes to my experience when I first came into the arena—is the human emotion that comes with being around other people. And I think everyone realized they missed it more than they even understood. There are players either whose teams are not participating, who were unable to engage this summer because of injuries or other issues, who, once they spoke to fellow NBA players, have asked to join the experience down in Orlando.

I think that it's the togetherness, the camaraderie, the brotherhood of the players. That's been the case for the coaches, the team staff and management as well. To take those masks off and bang into each other, whether it's someone on your team or an opponent, it's just a human craving we have for contact with other people.

SI: Looking back on the last few months, how confident were you that we would get here?

AS: It has ebbed and flowed. I mean, there have been moments of great optimism, and there have been moments of despair. And I'd say even now, my confidence still ebbs

DAVID E. KLUTHO [PORZINGIS]; GREG NELSON [SILVER]

DAVID E. KLUTHO

and flows. I'm very aware of how this virus continues to, in many cases, surprise even the greatest experts who've spent a lifetime studying coronaviruses. I also recognize that the coronavirus isn't the only thing that we have to be concerned with here. There's the ongoing health of the players. There are typical injuries that happen, and we've been very watchful to see whether there's an unusual rate of injuries, which we haven't seen so far. There's also the mental well-being of our players and the rest of the community, living on a campus. It's been roughly three weeks so far, but for those teams that ultimately end up competing in the Finals for the championship, if everything goes according to plan, that's still more than, well, roughly two months away, so it's a long time of relative isolation.

SI: As you pieced this plan together, was there one issue you kept coming back to?

AS: Testing. How those protocols would work in terms of daily testing, whether we were comfortable that sufficient tests were available, that we were not taking those tests away from the surrounding community, that we could turn those tests around on a rapid-enough basis to make it workable in the community. Something we're still dealing with is how we would handle false positives, and also the recognition that statistically you're going to get false negatives along the way, too.

SI: Anything you wish you could have done?

AS: I'd say my biggest disappointment is that we couldn't find a sensible way to bring 30 teams down there. We know everything here involves compromises, but I do feel bad there are eight teams that are not part of the experience.

SI: You have said you wanted to bring the sport back for the fans. But there were huge financial consequences if the NBA didn't come back. What would have been the fallout if the league couldn't return?

AS: [*Pauses.*] I'm hesitating only because it's better to play than not to play, but in terms of a net basis, it's not as dramatically different as people might think, because it is so costly to do what we're doing in Orlando. It's not a sustainable model, but we also recognize that this virus will end and that at some point we will return to more of a normal business operation with fans in seats. But I recognize that there's a chance that still this season could come to a halt. The league certainly would have survived had we been forced to shut down, and it will survive if we're forced to shut down sometime before October.

SI: The NBA has been supportive of player advocacy, from messaging on the back of uniforms to relaxing rules on kneeling during the anthem. It is, frankly, not a position I think the league would have taken a few years ago. When the issue of kneeling during the anthem came up in 2017, you were pretty clear that you expected players to stand. What made this different?

AS: The killing of George Floyd has been a turning point in the movement for social justice in the United States. The league, our team owners and the players had many conversations about what was happening in our country, the fact that an estimated 25 million Americans have protested over issues around racial injustice. And, of course, there's the recognition that roughly 80% of our players are Black. George Floyd's killing and the protests were happening right at the time when we were negotiating the return protocols with the players, and they also felt that it was part and parcel with returning to basketball that we collectively focus on these issues.

[We've attempted] to engage people, regardless of race, in conversations about why it is there are such great inequities in this country, even around this immediate health crisis. Black Americans are being hospitalized at multiple the rate that white Americans are of COVID; economic disparities are hitting Black Americans at much greater rates than white Americans in this pandemic. Our view as a league was it was part of a responsibility to respond to our players and to help use this platform of the NBA to get people to engage on what we acknowledge can be a very uncomfortable conversation.

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HEART OF THE MATTER
Social justice messages have been prevalent on the courts as well as on the backs of jerseys.

And honestly, from a personal standpoint, I participate in some of those uncomfortable conversations at the league office directly with many of my Black colleagues, some of whom I've worked with for decades who were saying things to me that maybe they never felt comfortable saying to me in the past. In some cases it was about personal life experiences they had, which they hadn't shared, and in other cases was how they were experiencing the NBA as a Black league official. I found myself in some cases becoming very defensive in those conversations, but I was also forcing myself to listen. Collectively we felt that these are conversations are ones that we need to be having as a country.

We were not in a position, given that we were attempting to return to play in the middle of all the social unrest, to avoid being part of the conversation . . . given that some of the most high-profile Black people in the world play in the NBA.

SI: Is the criticism that comes with the NBA's embracing this position, from conservative networks and politicians, just the cost of doing business?

AS: To be honest, it makes me uncomfortable. I understand critics who say that they turn to sports to avoid controversy. But it's unavoidable at this moment in time in our country. I wish there was an easier path for us to follow right now. Even if there were, I don't think it would necessarily be the responsible thing to do.

I think our fans are able to separate words on the floor or messages on the players' jerseys or the floor. Even to the extent that they don't, I think they recognize that these are not simple times. Our players are not one-dimensional people, and they can both be deeply concerned about issues that our country faces and at the same time perform their craft at the highest level.

SI: You mentioned next season. How deep into the planning stages are you? Is it bubble or bust, at this point, if the landscape hasn't changed?

AS: We are deep into the planning stages, but only to the extent that we have dozens of permutations as we look into next season. It's certainly not bubble or bust. Our first and highest priority would be to find a way to have fans in our arenas. We're continuing to look at all the different testing methods. We are current on vaccine developments and antivirals and other protocols around the possibility of bringing people together in arenas. We're studying what colleges are doing as they look to bring thousands of students back on campus. We're going to try to find the right balance between waiting as long as possible, so we have the best possible information at the time we're making the decision, and recognizing that, at some point, we have to begin to lock in plans. We would like to find a way to play in front of fans, but it's just too early to know how realistic this is.

I have to say though, I would not bet against American ingenuity. Just because of how high-profile our experience in Orlando is right now, we are in conversation with dozens of testing companies. We're studying all kinds of new, relatively inexpensive, rapid tests. The extent those tests are successful and coming to market, that will also open up more possibilities for us in bringing fans into arenas, even prevaccine.

SI: Has putting all this together been easier or harder with a newborn in your life?

AS: [*Laughs.*] In some ways, easier. The silver lining—no pun intended—has been that. My wife and I had a child in the middle of this, in mid-May, a new daughter. And that's the time of year where I would have been on the road. There's no doubt I would have spent some time at home, but it probably wouldn't have been more than a week in the middle of the playoffs. And so the fact that I've been around not just my newborn, but also my three-year-old daughter, and watching her develop over the last four months, having the opportunity to spend time with her every day, having her sort of sit on my lap for a lot of the Zoom calls, despite all the difficulties over this period, has been a real joy in my life. □

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THE TOTAL ATHLETE

PHOTOGRAPH OF DERRICK HENRY BY
JEFFERY A. SALTER

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THE IMPOSSIBILITIES OF RUSSEL

WIL

BY
CONOR ORR

PHOTOGRAPH BY
ROB TRINGALI

MOMENTS OF IMPROVISATIONAL
MOST UNIQUELY SKILLED AND UNUSUALLY
ACADEMICS AND WILSON HIMSELF—WATCHING
SESSION—ATTEMPT TO EXPLAIN HOW THESE

L

MAGIC HAVE DEFINED THE NFL'S
BUILT QUARTERBACK. COACHES, TRAINERS,
THREE OF HIS GREATEST HITS IN A FILM
MOMENTS COME TO BE

SON

RUSSELL WILSON

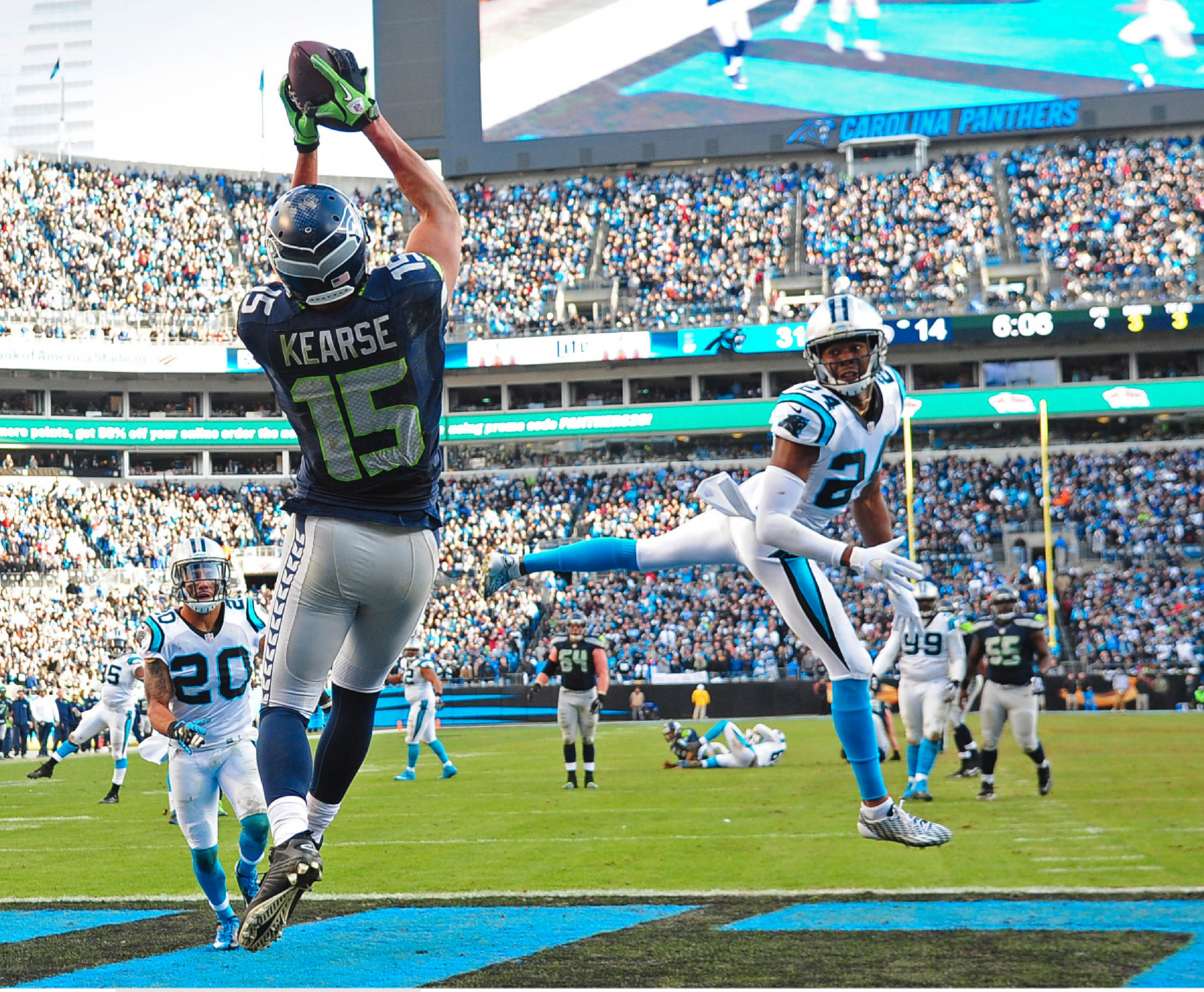
HAS AGREED TO SHED SOME LIGHT ON "RUSSELL WILSON THINGS"—THE IRONICALLY GENERIC TERM WE'VE COINED FOR THE FREEWHEELING CIRCUMNAVIGATION OF DEFENDERS WHO HAVE ADVANCED DEEP INTO SEATTLE'S BACKFIELD. THE PLAYS THAT SEEM INCREASINGLY DOOMED EVERY TIME WILSON TURNS HIS BACK TO THE DEFENSE.

The plays that seem biomechanically impossible but that, in reality, become uniquely more possible given Wilson's college-linebacker physique. The plays that end, typically, with some version of a blind jump hook over a towering defensive end's head, the ball landing in the arms of his receiver.

Jake Heaps, Wilson's former teammate and now his personal QB coach, likes to think of this all as art. Wilson, he says, like Picasso or Van Gogh, was, thankfully, never chided for coloring outside the lines. He adapts, survives and then thrives in a way that is both unusual and beautiful. For Decker Davis, personal trainer to both Wilson and his wife, the singer Ciara, these plays represent a devotion to craft, the culmination of a workout plan. Davis and the QB re-create unusual football scenarios in strange places, searching, for example, for the hottest, deepest sand in Rio de Janeiro to practice throws and spinouts in the middle of Carnival. Something about that sand, Decker says, wears you out faster.

Maggie Catlin, a physical therapist at the University of Washington, watches Wilson and sees a marvel of motor control, a quarterback who moves unlike anyone else at the position.

On the eve of a season to be headlined by the next great class of quarterbacks (Patrick Mahomes, Lamar Jackson, Deshaun Watson) and that will kick off the farewell tours for any number of aging greats (Brady, Brees, Big Ben, Rivers, Rodgers), where does Wilson, with his incredible theatrics, fit into all of this? Those close to him insist he's long been crafting improvisational masterpieces while the rest of the football world remained enamored with the pocket quarterback elite. Then he sharpened his pocket game at a time when those same people started obsessing over the mobility and theatrics of today's young stars, as if they were something new—something we'd been missing all along.



FADEAWAY, JUMPER
Wilson (tangled on the ground with Allen on the other side of the 20-yard line), fit his throw over the outstretched hand of the All-Pro defensive back, Norman, while allowing Kearse to make the catch and get down inbounds.

SCOTT CUNNINGHAM/GETTY IMAGES

Is it possible that the essence of Russell Wilson—voted by his peers as the NFL's second-best player in 2019, yet never the recipient of a single MVP vote; overshadowed by Seattle's Legion of Boom defense on the front half of his career and by a new generation of stars on the back end—will go forever underappreciated?

Perhaps a look inside his mind while he relives these "Russell Wilson things" (over video conference call; it is still 2020) might spur one to reconsider the natural order of things. It is a cliché: the player who enters a new season believing it will be his best. And still it's worth noting: Those close to Wilson believe there is something truly special on the horizon, the coronavirus be damned. Something that will elevate these little moments of football genius to a more appropriate level of appreciation.

WILSON APPEARS, through the magic of Zoom, in a sparsely decorated office inside his Seattle-area home, having just come from the nursery down the hall. He is in a brief pre-training-camp quarantine after the birth of his son, Win, which means he's not exempt from changing diapers.

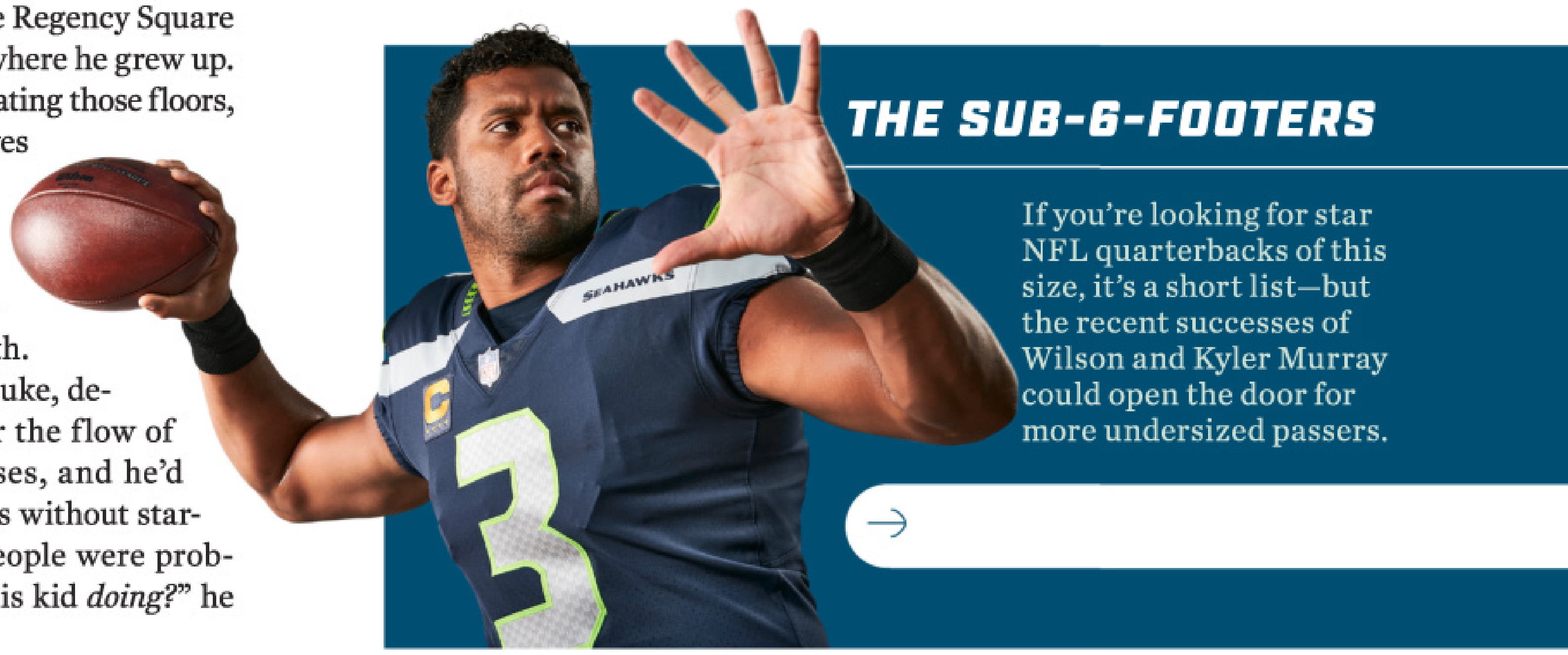
Video is queued up on our shared screen, and there he is, escaping from Jared Allen. We're in the middle of a frantic Seattle comeback—one that will ultimately fall short—in a playoff game at Carolina five seasons ago. The Seahawks face third-and-goal, the shotgun snap is from the three-yard line and

Wilson starts to roll right, per the play design. But almost immediately he's headed straight backward, Allen having broken through the middle of the offensive line. With Wilson's receivers smothered in man coverage, the QB is forced to conjure up new reserves of space and time.

This play, Wilson says, is about presence—the ability to see beyond what your mind is alerting you to. In this case: the 270-pound man charging straight at you.

"A lot of people want to look at Jared right here," Wilson says. "Me, I want to keep my eyes downfield. That's the magic of it all, to be able to see these things as one big picture."

In his mind, he is eight years old, weaving through the Regency Square Mall in Richmond, where he grew up. He remembers navigating those floors, trying to keep his eyes focused on his destination and not on the hordes of bodies and swinging shopping bags in his path. He would spin and juke, developing a sense for the flow of the oncoming masses, and he'd *feel* the open avenues without staring them down. "People were probably like, What is this kid *doing?*" he says, laughing.



THE SUB-6-FOOTERS

If you're looking for star NFL quarterbacks of this size, it's a short list—but the recent successes of Wilson and Kyler Murray could open the door for more undersized passers.

Back on the screen he spins, momentarily turning his back on the play, to create more space, drifting past the 20-yard line. He says he remembers making the decision, finally, to unleash the ball the moment that safety Kurt Coleman, lurking deep in the center of Carolina's defense, committed to a different receiver—a ridiculously subtle movement.

Asked how such a small twitch could trigger a reaction, Wilson lands on a basketball metaphor. As a point guard, he says, "you don't just watch one player, you watch the orchestration of the play. *Where people are*. You have to study the paint." The pass he ends up throwing on our particular play? Wilson says it's a football version of a fadeaway jump shot. He remembers first attempting something like this at Collegiate School, his prep school in Richmond, against Godwin High, to a receiver named Spencer Robinson—a fact he recalls with a peculiar ease. Now he practices it with regularity.

Wilson's release movement is both a pirouette and a hip torque, resulting in a perfectly floated, near-blind pass to Jermaine Kearse in the back of the end zone. The ball travels just over the outstretched fingertips of cornerback Josh Norman, then at the peak of his powers, and into the hands of Kearse, who follows with a short celebratory quarter-hop in the end zone.

The way Wilson puts it: Yes, his is a lifestyle of training and mental preparedness (he compares himself to both a race car, needing constant tweaks and repairs, and that car's driver), but that all blends with the carefree spirit of a kid bobbing and weaving past Foot Locker and Spencer's. In the process of describing this one play, Wilson references childhood experiences as a mallrat, as a high school point guard and as a shortstop extending for a ground ball lashed up the middle of the infield.

His origin story and narrative are tightly anchored to this theory that kids should be outside playing all different sports; it's something he comes back to often. In sixth or seventh grade he was primarily a baseball player when he was rushed into his first organized football game, playing quarterback without any knowledge of the playbook and leading his team to a 50-plus-point victory. Before transferring to Wisconsin, where he'd focus during his final collegiate season on football, he also played baseball at North Carolina State. He was a fourth-round pick by the Colorado Rockies, spending two seasons in the minors, and later he attended spring training with the Rangers and the Yankees.

His multisport athleticism, plus the repetition of that fadeaway throw—it's second nature to him now.

"A great shortstop is natural," he says. "I always want to make it look easy. I've always wanted to make throwing the football look easy and effortless."

DAVIS, THE trainer, and Heaps, the personal QB coach, each describe having to create new drills tailored specifically for Wilson, because no one plays quite like him. In one such exercise, Davis will have the quarterback stand one-legged on a spongy Airex balance pad, or on an inflatable Waff ball, and then Davis will toss a three-pronged

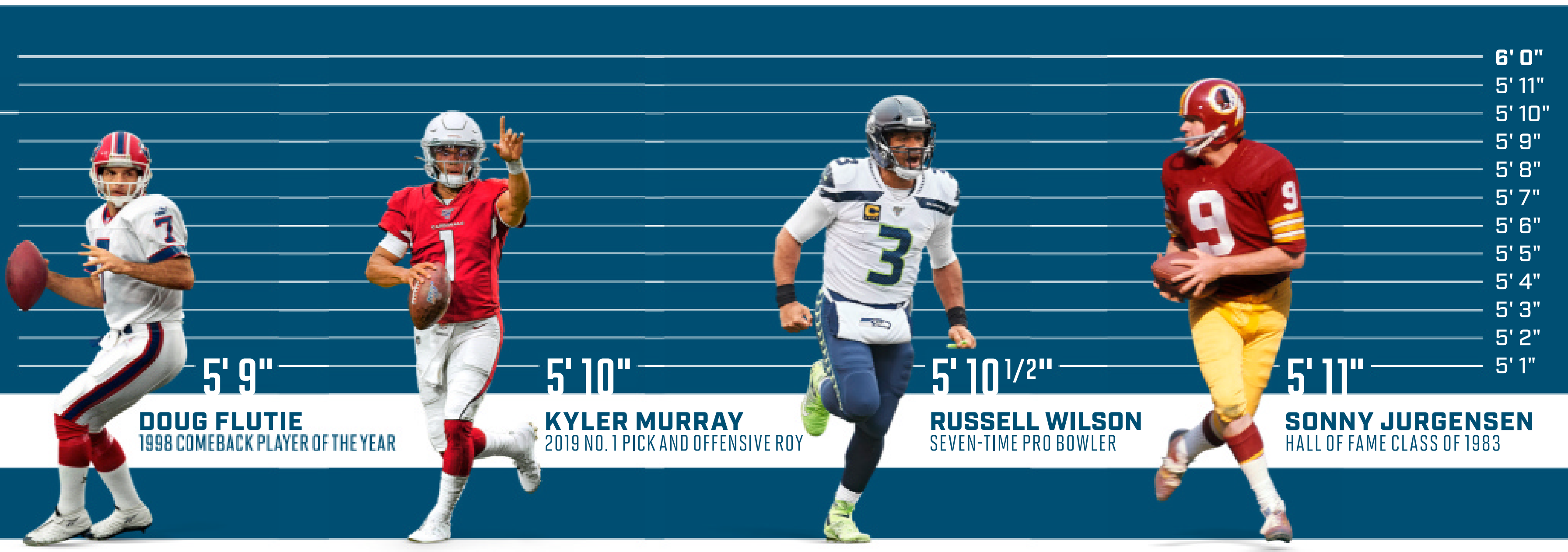
FROM LEFT: KOHJIRO KINNO; ANDY LYONS/GETTY IMAGES; NILS NILSEN; ROB TRINGALI; FOCUS ON SPORT/GETTY IMAGES

HECOstix at the QB. Each prong of the stick is colored differently, and Wilson will have to catch it by whatever-colored handle Davis calls out. The goal: force Wilson to zero in on his task, despite whatever uncomfortable or unusual thing Davis throws at his body.

Heaps, honing Wilson's gift for dropping high-arching rainbow passes with pinpoint precision, frequently has the QB chucking balls over a goalpost, simulating the peak of a defender's outstretched hands, toward a target.

Which brings us to the second "Russell Wilson thing," from a 2017 Thursday-nighter in Arizona, executed by a quarterback who's figured out what he's capable of doing, refined his mind to trust it and hired a maniacal training staff to sharpen his unique tools—his outlier skills.

IN WILSON'S MIND, HE IS EIGHT YEARS OLD, WEAVING THROUGH THE MALL. HE WOULD SPIN AND JUKE. "PEOPLE WERE PROBABLY LIKE, WHAT IS THIS KID *DOING?*" HE LAUGHS.



On tape the Seahawks are protecting a 15–10 lead early in the fourth quarter, sitting at their own 44 facing a second-and-21, trying to claw back from consecutive penalties by the offensive line—holding and false start—to begin the series. The play is called "Smash" and it incorporates a naked bootleg, meaning that Wilson, taking a shotgun snap from the right hashmark, will fake a handoff and roll left, toward the open side of the field, with almost zero protection. No one is immediately open, and the QB is forced to hold the ball.

Receiver Doug Baldwin, originally charged with delivering some "get in the way" blocking, realizes that the play is in trouble. He releases to get open, freeing up defensive end Chandler Jones, whom Baldwin had been occupying at the line, to sprint at Wilson.

The quarterback, in turn, makes a hard step toward the sideline, then spins backward, causing Jones to wobble slightly and slow. Meanwhile: Safety Tyrann Mathieu, sensing an opportunity to pin Wilson in the backfield, rushes in and leaps behind Jones, as Wilson tries to square his body to throw.

In reaction, Wilson pulls the ball down and spins backward *again*—he is almost 20 yards behind the original line of scrimmage—and both Jones and Mathieu, still closing, split up and shut down two available rushing lanes. Finally, a third Cardinals defender, defensive end Olsen Pierre, is coming from Wilson's right, blocking that escape route.

"People don't understand," says Wilson as he watches it all unfold. "For me—right here—the game is *suuuper*slow in my mind, because I've done this before."

Wilson has twice now turned his back on Jones, one of the most prolific pass rushers of the past decade. But while doing so he is getting narrow, split-second glimpses downfield and accounting for his most dependable receiver, Baldwin, as well as the defender situation in his vicinity (the mental processing). Dana Bible, Wilson's football coach at N.C. State, says he's never met a player before or since who can essentially count moving pieces while blindfolded.

"I know [Baldwin] is still there," Wilson says, "so when I do one more spin move to free some space and make [Jones and Mathieu] move, that's when I knew I would give Doug a chance."

After the second spin, Wilson hurls

his body into a fadeaway motion and lets the ball loose. On the broadcast, NBC play-by-play man Mike Tirico says “cue the circus music” with the casualness of someone who’s seen this all from the quarterback before. Wilson lofts the ball toward Baldwin, who’s stationed at the Cardinals’ 48-yard line, near Antoine Bethea. The Cardinals’ safety, then 33 but participating in the kind of play the likes of which he could have never prepared for, mistimes his leap and falls to the ground as the ball lands in the grasp of Baldwin, who chugs 40-odd yards downfield to Arizona’s two-yard line.

The broadcast feed, meanwhile, zooms in quickly enough to catch Wilson’s face, which resembles a marathon runner patiently and comfortably slogging through the waning moments of mile 23.

Wilson admits that he’ll sometimes smile when he does Russell Wilson things: “I’ll say, ‘That’s pretty sweet.’ ” But let that not be confused with self-assurance; the quarterback is merely accustomed to his own otherworldly body control. Russell Wilson things belong to all of us, not to the person who has formulated himself to make them routine.

SPIN CYCLE
With Jones (left) and Mathieu in pursuit, Wilson turned his back on the play twice before finding Baldwin on the left sideline.

MATT KARTOZIAN/USA TODAY SPORTS

“LET RUSS COOK.” Scroll through Twitter on a Seahawks gameday, and that, roughly, is the typical plea from fans, aimed at coach Pete Carroll and offensive coodinator Brian Schottenheimer. Carroll’s goal, it can seem, is to call the most balanced offense in football. In 2019, only five teams passed on a lower percentage of plays than Seattle (54.0%), and in ’18 *no* team threw less frequently. The team went to the playoffs in both of those seasons, in large part because Wilson consistently delivered his heroics late. According to the analytics site *FiveThirtyEight*, the ’19 Seahawks played six “coin-flip” games, in which the win probability for both teams was 40% or greater within the final five minutes of regulation. The Seahawks won five of those games. Of their 12 wins between the regular season and playoffs, 11 of them came by a one-possession margin.

Of the three plays on our docket, the last one, from the 2019 opener against the Bengals, may be the least overtly spectacular. Which, in a way, speaks to the point: Russell Wilson things have become commonplace.

On our screen, Seattle trails Cincinnati 17–14 in the final minute of the third quarter. On third-and-five at his own 41, Wilson stands alone in an empty shotgun set and upon receiving the snap briefly surveys five eligible receivers running intermediate routes near the first-down marker.

“They’re in a jam front,” Wilson says of the defensive alignment, “so they have five guys up front, then they drop two. They’re really rushing three dynamic rushers and dropping two really great rushers so they can spy me. They have two spies.”

Despite that limited pass rush, Wilson immediately gets pressure from his blind side and begins to flee to his left. He ducks into a narrow inlet that develops in the sea of bodies, stepping up into what appears to be a clean pocket to reassess his reads or perhaps make a run for the first down. But the defense—those spies—is prepared for this eventuality, as 6' 6" defensive end Carlos Dunlap and 6' 1" linebacker Preston Brown are waiting for him. “Like stepping into the lane and seeing Dikembe Mutombo,” Wilson says.

Catlin, the UW physical therapist,

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compares what she's seen of Wilson to some of the other great modern quarterbacks. She says that, on a given play, his body goes through an entirely different process than, say, Aaron Rodgers or Tom Brady experiences. Specifically: For Wilson, throwing on the run is truly *throwing on the run*.

“If Aaron or Tom wants to throw on the run, their bodies have to create an entirely new motor plan—a new task,” Catlin says. “Russell doesn't need to switch tasks. He can use the same motor plan.”

From a biomechanical standpoint, she says, for an athlete of Wilson's stature (a shade over 5' 10 ½" at his NFL combine weigh-in and 215 pounds), success boils down to an ability to adapt. “For some, their body just can't figure out how to [succeed]. Then there's this other group of people who have this crazy ability to adapt to a situation. Their body will find a way, even if it's not the motor plan that you and I would have picked. *Adaptability* is the word we use all the time.” Wilson has, in a sense, adapted and become something more evolved.

As that one play unfolds at CenturyLink Field, Dunlap and Brown represent just one of Wilson's problems. Another: Even this late in the down, there are no good options available downfield. The best of them is rookie D.K. Metcalf, who, working the left side of the field, finally has a step on his man—but any throw would have to be calibrated so that it a) drops in over that defender but b) also arrives before Metcalf reaches the heavy traffic waiting for him downfield.

Reliving the play on his computer, Wilson brings up his mental coach, Trevor Moawad, whose clients have also included Deshaun Watson, Eli Manning, Alex Smith and the Alabama program under Nick Saban. Moawad's work centers on building a “neutral” mindset and the idea that eliminating persistent negative thought is more important and effective than encouraging persistent positive thought. He has programmed Wilson, in a sense, to stand in front of two much taller oncoming players with all of his receivers covered and think about the situation in the following way: *Just throw it up. Alley-oop. It will work.* And not: *Metcalf is in his first NFL game. If I loft the ball to him with enough air under it, it may reach him, but so will Bengals safety Jessie Bates, who can cover 10 yards of field in 1.58 seconds.*

SEEING BIG THINGS

Vision is key for Wilson, who is often giving up a half-foot to teammates and opponents in the trenches.

Ball still in hand, Wilson gears down slightly, peeking around Brown to spot a thin slice of field through which to aim *just* before he lets loose a touch pass. Bates, meanwhile, begins a full diagonal sprint toward the receiver, crashing into Metcalf—still midair, reaching for the ball—but he is too late. Metcalf secures the ball, and Seattle notches 25 must-have yards on a crucial third down.

Two snaps later, Wilson will open the fourth quarter with a 44-yard touchdown to Tyler Lockett, the eventual game-winner having been set up by a Russell Wilson thing about which no commercial will be made.

“I just turned 31,” Wilson says. “I'm right at the beginning of my prime. I have so many more years left. At least 10-plus years left. I'm just getting started. That's the fun part for me. My goal is to play another 15 years.”

Those in and around football speak often about the difficulties of engineering a great quarterback, the perils and obstacles along the way. They struggle with the burden of being a franchise quarterback. They grow cynical. They get hurt. They get minimized by unimaginative schemes. But what if we missed a blueprint that has been right in front of us for eight years now? What if Wilson's approach—the way he has contextualized his experiences across multiple sports, engineered his strengths, maintained his creative freedom on the field and cemented a narrative of success in his mind—is the way to build the quarterback of the future?

What if these Russell Wilson things are just a prelude to something bigger for him, and players like him?

He takes in that key third-down play against the Bengals, and what he says could apply, essentially, to anything in his life at this moment: “It becomes who you are, in a way, once you believe it.” ◻

ROB TRINGALI

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BY
EMMA BACCELLIERI

ILLUSTRATION BY
EDDIE GUY

NICK WATNEY began Friday, June 19, the same way that he begins almost every day: He checked his phone to see how he'd slept the night before.

The 39-year-old professional golfer had been wearing a fitness tracker on his wrist for almost a year. (He'd chosen a device called the Whoop after he heard about it from PGA Tour mate Rory McIlroy.) Watney used the data to discern patterns about his game: What time did he need to go to bed to play his best? How would his quality of sleep differ if he ate dinner earlier? But on June 19—the day after he'd finished Round 1 of the RBC Heritage tournament in Hilton Head—the device offered him some more alarming information.

Your latest RPM measurement is significantly above your typical range, read the disclaimer, highlighting his breathing rate, or respirations per minute, from the night before. *If this trend continues, it might be a sign of illness or another condition.* His wristband showed that his breath had grown irregular in the night—especially worrisome given what he knew about the coronavirus.

But as Watney looked at the spike in his graph, he didn't feel short of breath. He wasn't coughing. He didn't think he had a fever, didn't think he was sick, and didn't understand how he could be sick. To compete in the tournament starting on Thursday, Watney had tested negative for the coronavirus on Tuesday; during the time in between, he had mainly been playing golf around others who had similarly tested negative.

"I was definitely concerned," he says. "But I was also confused—like, how?"

Just in case, Watney called a tournament official: Would it be possible for him to be checked once more before his tee time? The tournament agreed to administer an emergency test for COVID-19, but no one seemed particularly concerned. Watney was told he could head to the practice range while awaiting the results. Soon, however, his phone rang: You have to get off the course right away.

Watney's test had come back positive. The spike in his respiratory rate graph had not been a mistake. It had been an alert, and if not for his wristband, he never would have realized it.

These wearable fitness trackers do not offer a definitive solution for COVID-19. They're not FDA-approved, and while studies are ongoing, none have yet proved that they're able to detect illness. The devices are by no means a substitute for testing. But some researchers believe there's a chance that they could be one piece of a much larger strategy for trying to address the virus—and some sports leagues and college athletic programs have bought in. The PGA, LPGA, NBA, WNBA and schools like Alabama and Tennessee have obtained thousands of smart devices—watches, wristbands and rings—for their players, raising not only hopes for flagging early indicators of the virus, but also questions about the privacy and monitoring of athletes.

"TESTING IS IN A PATHETIC STATE IN THIS COUNTRY, AND THIS IS A GOOD ADDED FEATURE, ANOTHER DIMENSION OF DATA," TOPOL SAYS.

"Everybody mostly uses them as fitness trackers," says Michael Snyder, who studies wearables as director of the Center for Genomics and Personalized Medicine at Stanford. "But we see them as health monitors."

THERE ARE some 30 million Fitbit users in the U.S., and tens of millions more have devices like the Apple Watch, Whoop and Garmin watches. Most people use the monitors primarily to measure fitness, and they're often marketed as such: Track your steps. See how your heart rate changes at the gym. Optimize your sleep. They allow people to quantify their workouts with the precision of pros.

But for a researcher like Snyder, who started his work on wearables in 2014, the allure is different: A Fitbit or similar device can record up to 250,000 measurements per day. His team at Stanford began studying some of that information to try to answer one question: Could a Fitbit determine when someone was ill even before noticeable symptoms? In January 2017, Snyder's lab published a paper in the journal *PLOS Biology* showing the potential for a spike in heart rate to indicate illness such as the flu, particularly when paired with certain other shifts detectable by a smartwatch, like decreased activity and lower quality of sleep. Today—with "asymptomatic spread" now a household term—that research has become especially important.

This spring Snyder started a new study to see whether wearables could detect COVID-19. Data from 5,000 people who consented to share information from their devices—plus historical data from a smaller group of people who had already tested positive for the virus while they had been wearing smartwatches—yielded promising results: In about 80% of subjects who contracted COVID-19, heart rate spiked significantly after infection, often several days before any other symptoms appeared.

Snyder cites a couple of caveats. There's still no way to conclude that a spike in heart rate, or a sudden change in any other metric, is COVID-19, rather than another illness. The information has to be contextualized for each individual and their circumstances. ("If you're watching a scary movie marathon that's running for 12 hours, I suppose your heart rate could be up, too," Snyder says.) With further study, however, there could be game-changing results for the way that people think about these devices.

Snyder analogizes it to a car: The dashboard has all sorts of gauges, but generally, a driver doesn't have to pay too much attention to their specifics. If anything goes wrong, however, there's probably going to be a warning—a check-engine light, say—and that's worth paying attention to. Maybe it's nothing. Maybe it's minor. But the driver's still going to want to find out.

"It's not going to be perfect—just like how your car can break down without a light going on," says Snyder. "But most of the time, it probably flags something, and even if you're not entirely sure what it is, it's still useful to know."

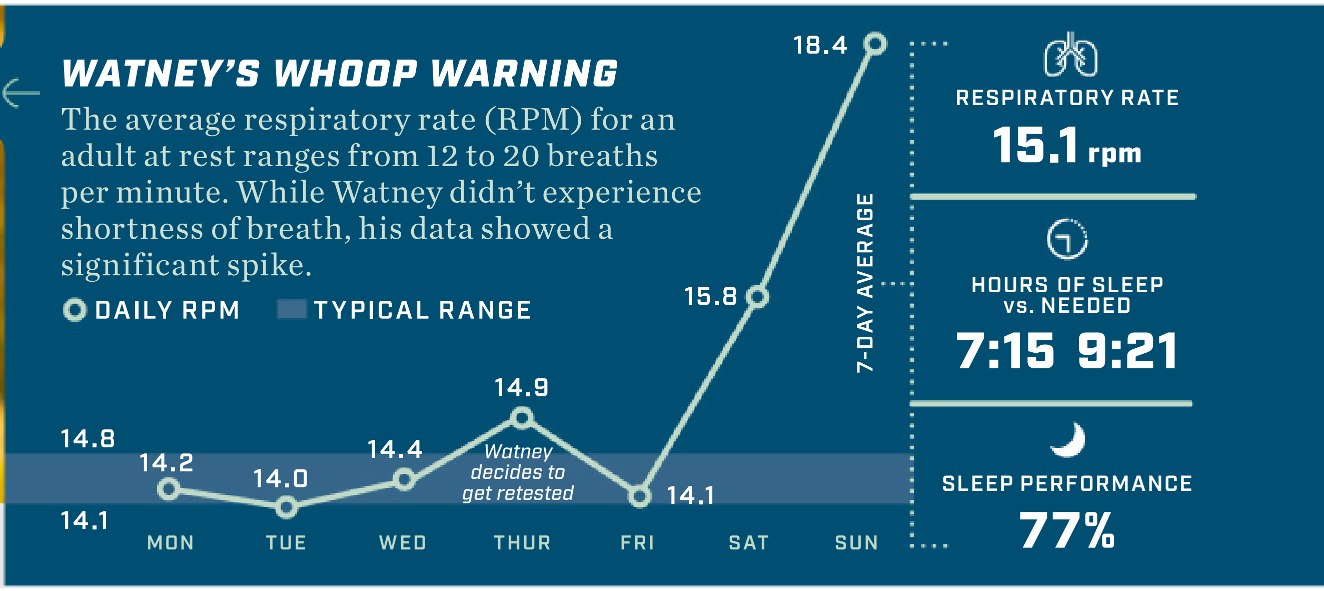
The findings are described in similar terms by Scripps Research executive vice president Dr. Eric Topol, who has also been studying wearables and COVID-19: "It's promising. But there's nothing proven."

Topol's current research involves data from 40,000 people with wearables, and it aims to determine how much information is needed to detect the coronavirus in a cluster of people, such as a neighborhood. Like Snyder, he's found that spikes in heart rate can be particularly significant—not as a guarantee of anything, and not as a confirmation of COVID-19, but as a potential sign to self-isolate or seek a test.

"Everyone talks about testing, testing, testing, and we're not going to get away from that. This is complementary," says Topol, a cardiologist and the chair of innovative medicine at Scripps. "But testing is in a pathetic state in this country, and this is a good added feature, another dimension of data."

This is the role that some leagues are hoping the devices might play. The PGA purchased 1,000 Whoop bands after Watney's diagnosis, providing them to any golfer or caddie who wanted one. The LPGA and Premier Lacrosse League followed suit, as did some colleges, like Tennessee, which has outfitted all its athletes with Whoop. Alabama offered Apple Watches to its football players. And the most eye-catching move came from the NBA, which obtained 2,000 Oura rings for the league's bubble in Orlando. (The WNBA later announced a similar partnership.)

JONATHAN FERREY/GETTY IMAGES



WATNEY'S WHOOP WARNING

The average respiratory rate (RPM) for an adult at rest ranges from 12 to 20 breaths per minute. While Watney didn't experience shortness of breath, his data showed a significant spike.

Oura bills itself as a "sleep and activity tracker" and retails starting at $299; it can measure heart rate, respiratory rate and body temperature, among other stats. The research on whether it can effectively predict the coronavirus is still developing. But the NBA's embrace of the brand made it the highest-profile news yet about wearables' capacity to detect COVID-19—which worried some researchers.

"I had two reactions," Topol says. "One was: I think it's smart that they're capturing this data. And the other was: It made me nauseated to see some of the claims. I mean, the idea that it worked 100%, or would prevent any spread? That's ridiculous."

The NBA itself did not make such claims. But the announcement of the partnership made for inflated headlines and social media chatter. One post that circulated widely—tens of thousands of retweets—described the ring as "capable of predicting COVID-19 symptoms." While it's true that just about any fitness device could be "capable" of such, it was an overstatement of Oura's confirmed ability. The ring isn't as well-known as the Fitbit or Apple Watch, and its design looks straight out of science-fiction, with a trio of sensors on the inside of a sleek band that slides over the index or middle finger. Add all of that together, and the NBA's high-tech ring was ripe for oversimplified takeaways.

"I was skeptical at first, just because I worried about people saying, 'Hey, this is a solution,' " says Benjamin Smarr, a professor of data science and bioengineering at UC San Diego, who is studying Oura's potential to detect COVID-19. "I called up the CEO of Oura and said, 'What are you doing? Are you getting all of us in trouble?' "

The CEO, Harpreet Singh Rai, has himself pumped the brakes: "We'll never be a medical device," he told ABC News. "I'm not trying to be a replacement for testing." But he does think the ring can play a role.

Smarr's research, which started in March, uses data from 50,000 Oura wearers in all 50 states. The preliminary results indicate that, as with the multidevice research done by Snyder and Topol, there can often be a spike in heart rate and change in body temperature that might serve as an early warning for COVID-19. "But there's a much more challenging question," Smarr says, "which is, How precisely can you differentiate 'This is COVID' versus it's the flu, or your allergies are acting up, or you stayed up all night and had a bender?" The NBA knows this—which is why the ring is one small piece of a much larger protocol and is recognized as experimental, rather than serving as the foundation of the whole project.

"They've been really clear-eyed about it, actually," says Smarr, who spoke to league representatives about his research before the start of the season. "They know it's an experiment. And my hope is that a lot of good conversations can come out of it. Are these data helpful? How do we integrate them into our community? And how do we make sure that if you're being monitored, your voice is being heard, and you're not being taken advantage of?"

That last query is a critical one: Any concerns a person might have around data privacy are justifiably amplified when it comes to medical data. After the NBA announced it would work with Oura, Lakers forward Kyle Kuzma tweeted, "Look like a tracking device." Jazz guard Joe Ingles replied, "Oh they tracking you for sure."

Over the last decade many NBA teams have embraced putting body-tracking devices on players when they train and practice, ostensibly to improve on-court performance—leading some players to express concern that data gleaned from the devices could be used against them in contract negotiations.

But the Oura does not come off when a player leaves the court: It's a 24/7 accessory. The NBA has said that teams will not have access to data collected by the ring and that players will be notified only if there are any indicators of illness. (All players are tested for the virus regularly, but Oura data, if deemed worrisome, could prompt additional testing.) The league also promised to delete all of the information permanently within four weeks of the end of the season. But a little skepticism is still understandable.

"There's going to be a lot of good medical care that comes out of this that would have been impossible otherwise," Smarr says of the research around wearables. "That's great. The flip side is, as a society, we have no protections for people having this kind of transparency."

BUBBLE BURSTER

Kuzma, who has been balling in the bubble, did not like the ring of the Oura monitor: He tweeted that it looked like "a tracking device."

JOE MURPHY/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES

In other words, no one would want to participate in a workplace program where wearable tech could be used to determine not only whether you're well enough to come to the office on any given day, but also what your health insurance should cost, or even if you're too "risky" to employ in the first place. Which is why it's good to set such a prominent workplace study in an environment like the NBA, says Smarr—where employees are unionized, have collectively bargained protections around their health and privacy, and have prominent voices and platforms. It doesn't erase every concern. (There's a reason why leagues have begun to address wearables in CBAs.) But it does offer the foundation for a solid starting point.

It also highlights some of the potential concerns for college athletes, who face quite a different power dynamic. When Bama distributed Apple Watches to football players this spring, some wondered whether it had run afoul of an NCAA regulation that bans schools from remotely supervising player workouts in the offseason. The school claimed that the watches were not used to track workouts—just to review sleep patterns and activity level, which, while allowed by the NCAA, is probably not any more comforting to a concerned player.

There's plenty that's still unknown here. But—much like the researchers behind this work—these leagues have figured that the role of wearables is a question worth asking.

"We don't view Whoop as the only solution, and we're not claiming to be able to diagnose COVID-19," says Will Ahmed, the company's founder and CEO. "But it can be an early indicator. And I think when you couple early indicators with other practices, like masks and social distancing and proper testing, you end up with an environment that's potentially safer."

COVID-19 HAS prompted other new uses for wearables in sports, too. When leagues shut down over the spring, some teams used the devices to help players manage practicing on their own and prevent injuries. And with the return of in-person training, the same player-tracking wearables that teams previously used to see precisely where someone was on the field were refitted to ensure everyone stayed six feet apart as much as possible.

There's another dimension of use here, too: fan engagement. With packed stadiums still a distant idea in the U.S., there's a push to find news ways to connect with supporters. One wearable brand, Catapult, has for the last few years used its devices to do that in Australian rugby—players' heart rates in big moments are displayed in certain broadcasts.

"I think trying to pull some metrics that really show what an athlete is going through but is not demeaning to the athlete in any form—I think it's one of those things that will probably come out of the industry in this time," says Catapult CEO Will Lopes.

Whoop has also begun to experiment with this feature. When PGA star Justin Thomas sank a 50-foot putt in a playoff at the Workday Charity Open in July, he allowed Whoop to share his heart rate afterward on social media, as measured by the wristband: 112 beats per minute as he lined up the shot, 146 BPM as he waited to see whether he would make it. The company says that it's actively pursuing ways to share more info like that.

As for Watney? He continued to wear his wristband while in isolation and did not experience serious symptoms. After returning from quarantine, he rejoined the Tour in July, but he still checks his respiratory rate daily: "It's been cool to see it return to normal."

GETTY IMAGES (FOOTBALL PLAYER); KATRINE GLAZKOVA/SHUTTERSTOCK

MIND AND BODY

The physical effects of pregame anxiety on athletes—from butterflies in the stomach to real pain—are well known, but little studied. One professor is trying to change that

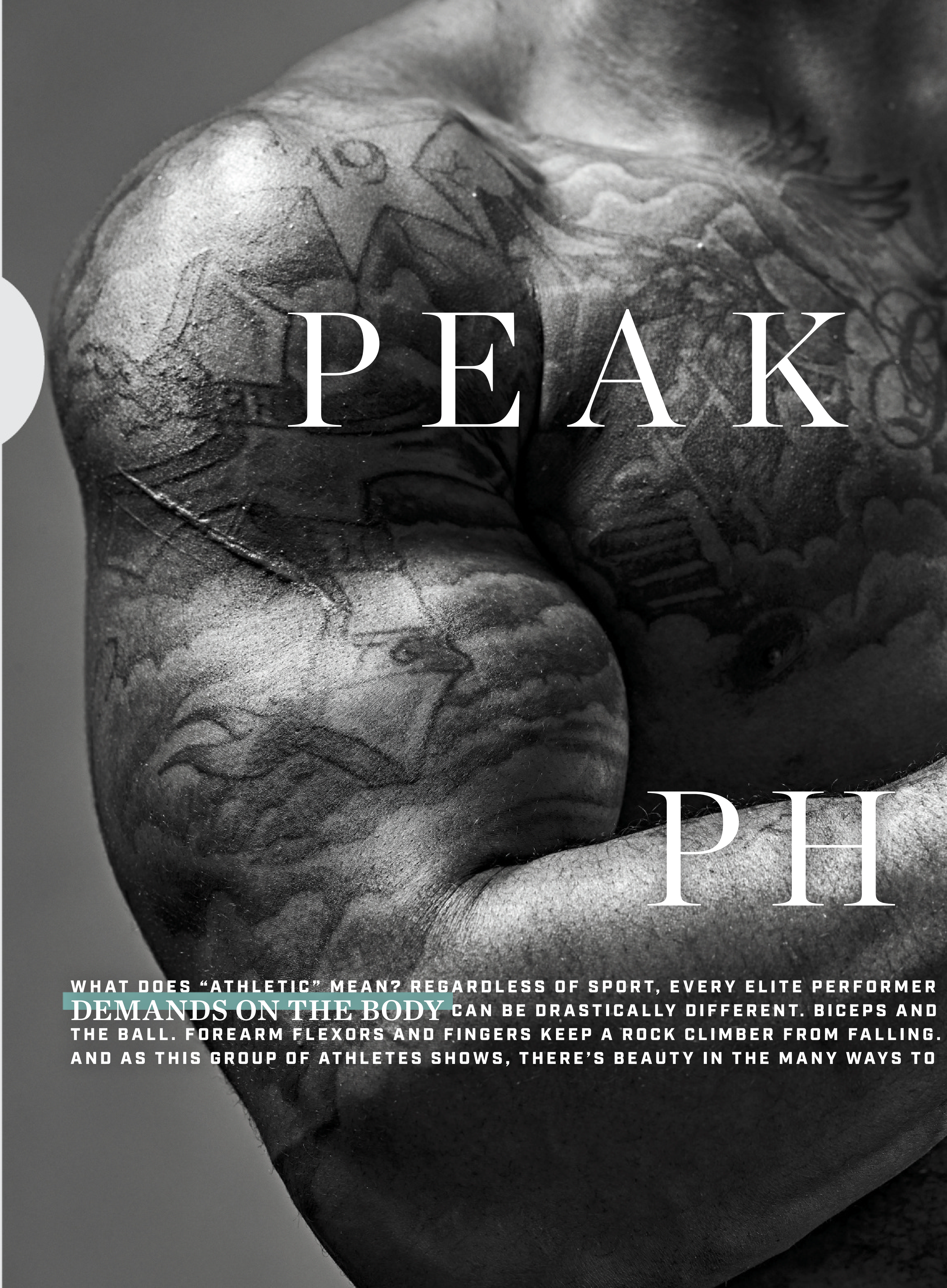
BY JAMIE LISANTI

EVERYONE KNOWS the feeling of butterflies in the stomach before a big event, encounter or game. But for some, including elite athletes, it can go beyond butterflies to other bodily symptoms, including an elevated heartbeat, tightness in the chest and a bout of the jitters. Veteran Eagles guard Brandon Brooks has spoken openly about the effects of his anxiety disorder, which he was diagnosed with in 2016 and has caused him to vomit before games. Brooks is hardly the only athlete to experience pregame anxiety, but the issue is little studied, according to Patrick Wilson, an associate professor of exercise science at Old Dominion.

Wilson is attempting to change that, with new research and his new book, *The Athlete's Gut*, which was published in May. "When a person is highly stressed or nervous—whether it be for a big game or something else—the brain releases a hormone called corticotropin releasing factor [CRF], which acts via the nervous system to affect the gut," he says.

Wilson adds that CRF causes a variety of effects, but two of the most prominent are decreased motility—or the ability of muscles to contract—in the stomach, which can cause nausea or reflux, and increased motility in the lower gut, which may explain "a sort of nervous diarrhea" in the hours leading up to competition.

So how do you combat these issues? According to Wilson, that's another area where research has yet to begin. "Strategies like mindfulness; slow, deep breathing; and listening to relaxing music may have some benefits," he says. "We are hoping to test some of these interventions in athletes in the next few years, so stay tuned."



PEAK PH

WHAT DOES “ATHLETIC” MEAN? REGARDLESS OF SPORT, EVERY ELITE PERFORMER
DEMANDS ON THE BODY CAN BE DRASTICALLY DIFFERENT. BICEPS AND
THE BALL. FOREARM FLEXORS AND FINGERS KEEP A ROCK CLIMBER FROM FALLING.
AND AS THIS GROUP OF ATHLETES SHOWS, THERE’S BEAUTY IN THE MANY WAYS TO

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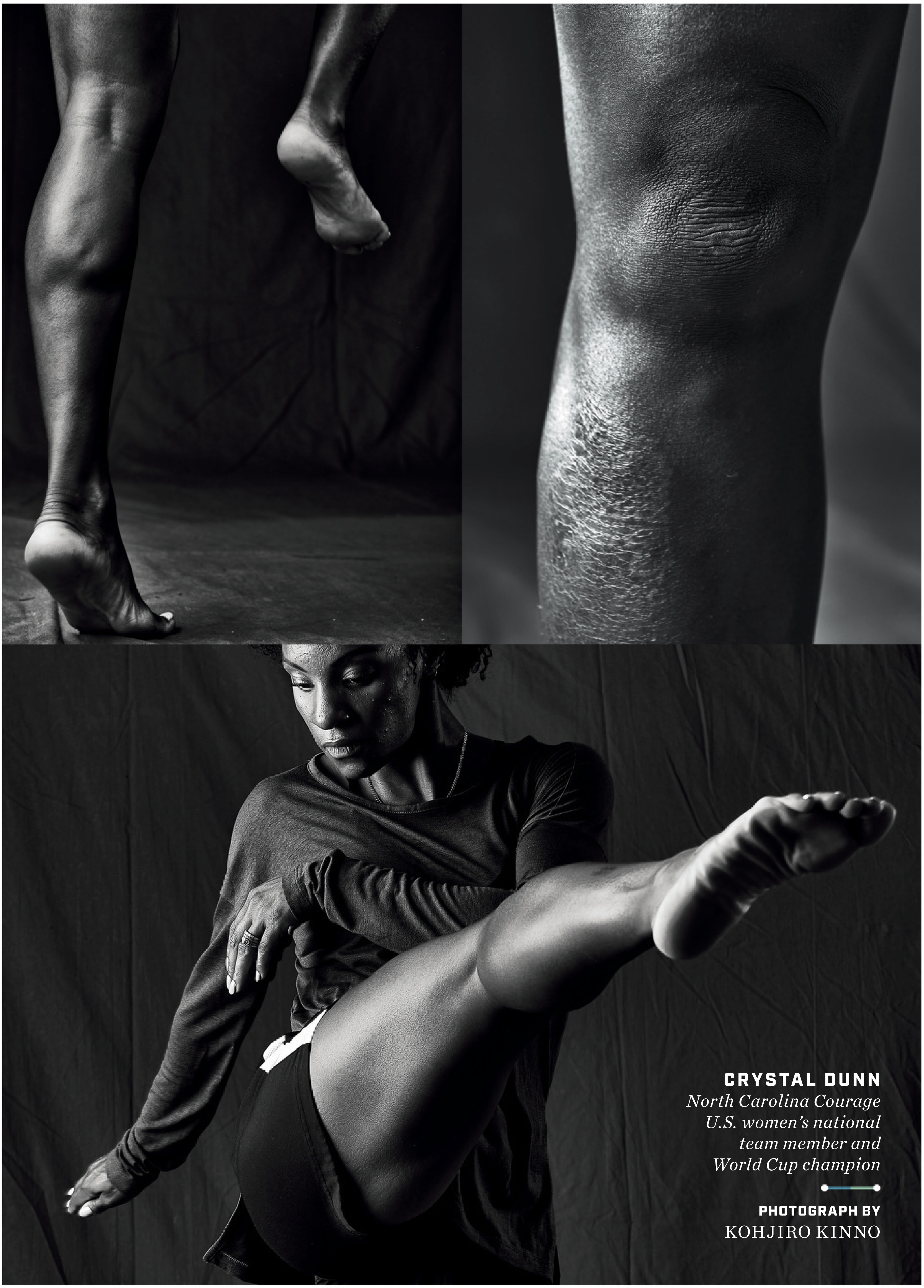
p. 49

YSIQUES

IS HIGHLY CONDITIONED—BUT THE
DELTS HELP AN NFL RUSHER PROTECT
AND SO ON. IN SPORTS AS IN LIFE,
BE IN PERFECT SHAPE

DERRICK HENRY
Tennessee Titans
2019 NFL rushing leader

PHOTOGRAPH BY
JEFFERY A.
SALTER



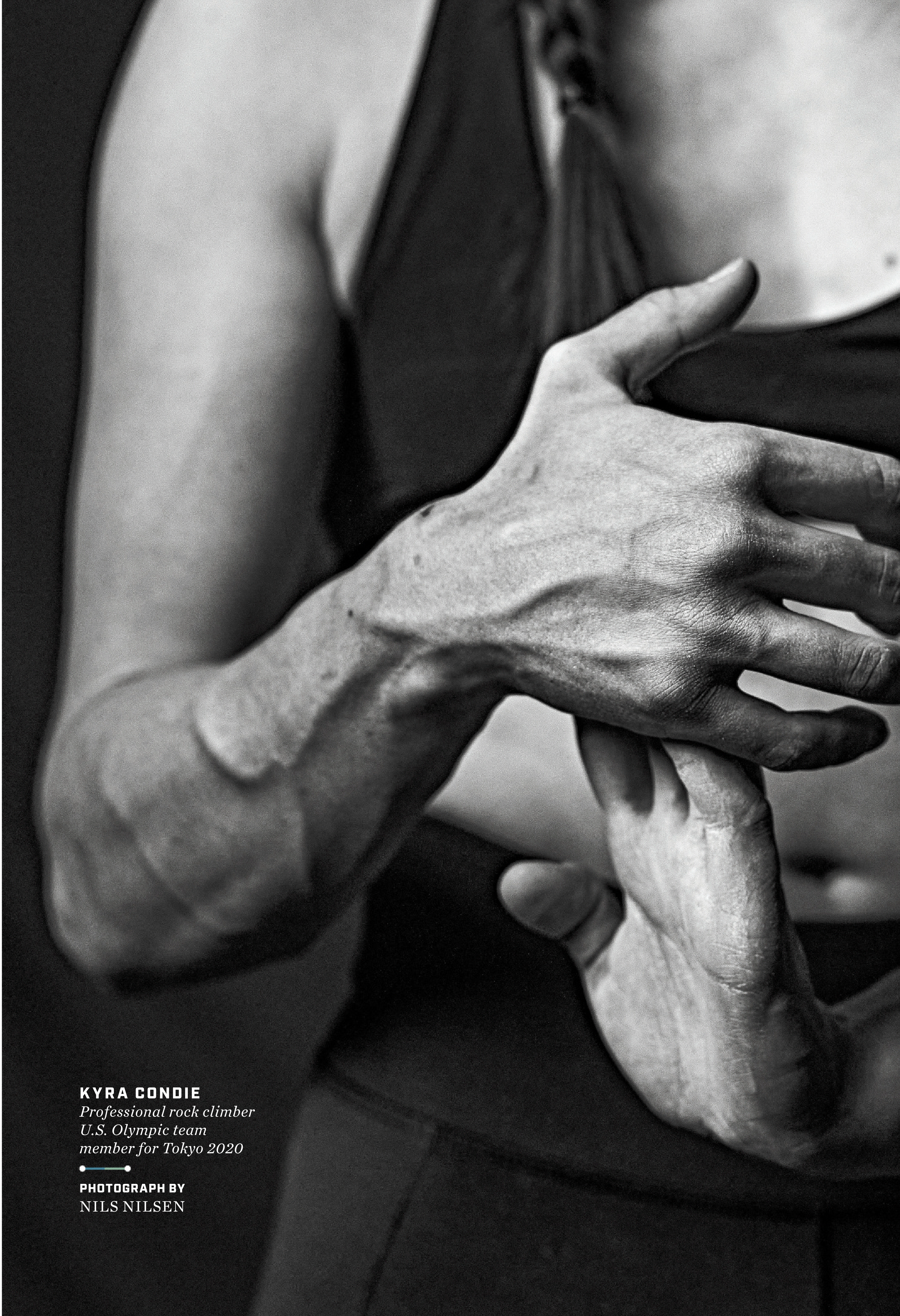
CRYSTAL DUNN

North Carolina Courage
U.S. women's national
team member and
World Cup champion

PHOTOGRAPH BY
KOHJIRO KINNO

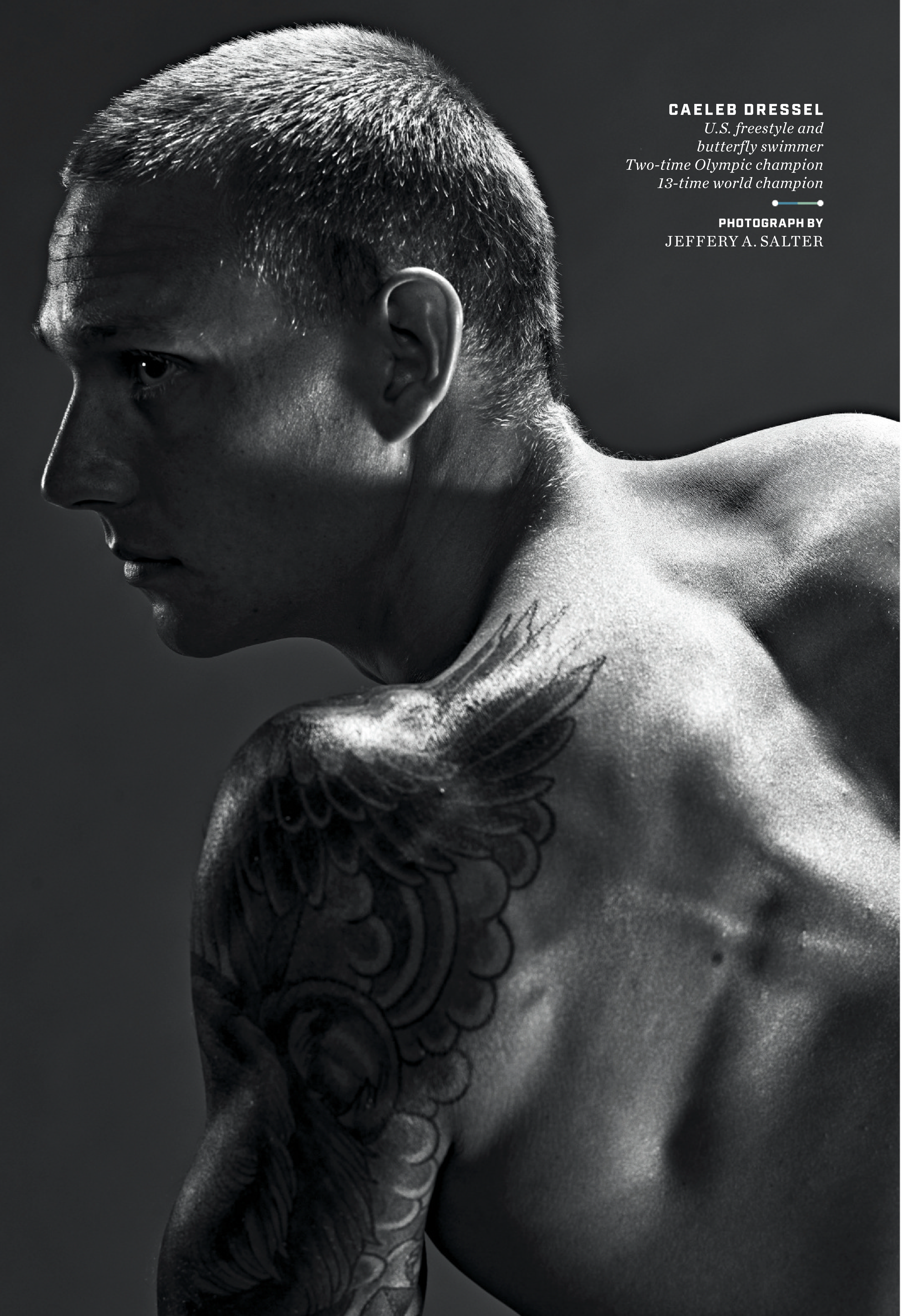
JOE KOVACS
U.S. Olympian
Two-time shot put world champion

PHOTOGRAPH BY
ERICK W. RASCO



KYRA CONDIE
Professional rock climber
U.S. Olympic team
member for Tokyo 2020

PHOTOGRAPH BY
NILS NILSEN



CAELEB DRESSEL
U.S. freestyle and
butterfly swimmer
Two-time Olympic champion
13-time world champion

PHOTOGRAPH BY
JEFFERY A. SALTER

MASTER MIND

AS MORE ATHLETES PRIORITIZE MENTAL PERFORMANCE, THEY DRAW ON EXPERTS LIKE PADDY STEINFORT FOR A BURGEONING BRAND OF COGNITIVE COACHING

"DON'T F--- THIS UP," Paddy Steinfort tells a major league pitcher throwing his bullpen session. "Don't f--- this up. Don't f--- it up."

Standing directly behind the right-hander as he heaves pitch after pitch, Steinfort fine-tunes his provocations: "Don't hang the curveball. Don't hang it out there. *I haven't got this pitch today.* Is the coach coming out for a mound visit? Or is the GM in the stands looking at me right now?"

Steinfort is giving voice to the stream of distracting thoughts rattling around the pitcher's head so that he can recognize and overcome them. The 41-year-old former Australian Rules football player and physiotherapist turned mental performance coach likens this approach to nudging a ballplayer who's rehabbing a knee injury off-balance as he tries to throw and catch a ball. "I'll try and push your attention forward, I'll try and shift it to the dugout or to the stands," Steinfort says, "and your

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BY
JULIE KLIEGMAN

PHOTOGRAPH BY
MICHAEL J. LE BRECHT II

job as a performer is to bring it back to where I am right now.”

GREG NELSON

A native of Melbourne, Steinfort has worked with teams in the NFL (Eagles), MLB (Blue Jays, Red Sox) and NBA (76ers), as well as with athletes in seven other sports, and with the U.S. Army. He has helped players develop from relative obscurity into Olympic champions, league MVPs and No. 1 draft picks. That list includes Sixers All-Stars Ben Simmons and Joel Embiid, Toronto phenom Vladimir Guerrero Jr. and Chiefs quarterback Patrick Mahomes, now the NFL’s highest-paid player, when he was at Texas Tech.

Like many mental performance coaches, Steinfort is not a licensed psychologist or psychiatrist, though he is trained to spot signs of mental illness and make referrals to other professionals. He focuses on developing cognitive skills, such as confidence, focus and motivation, just as a strength and conditioning coach helps enhance an athlete’s power, speed and agility. The practice isn’t new, but in the last decade, more and more college and pro teams are embracing practitioners of this burgeoning field.

STEINFORT JOKES ABOUT BEING “LIKE A SECRET AGENT” AS HE TRIES TO UNDERSTAND AN ATHLETE’S MOODS AND NEEDS BY SUBTLY LEARNING DETAILS FROM TEAMMATES AND LOVED ONES.

In the NBA, for example, the Mavs hired the league’s first full-time mental skills coach around the turn of the century. Today, about half the teams have one on staff. (And the NBA now requires every team to have a full-time mental health professional, either a licensed psychologist or behavioral therapist.) In addition to director of mental skills Don Kalkstein in Dallas, these coaches in various leagues go by various titles, such as Tampa Bay Rays mental performance coach Justin Su’a, Green Bay Packers director of performance psychology Chris Carr and New Jersey Devils director of player and team development Aimee Kimball.

Despite evidence showing the benefits of mental skills training for athletes, coaches and owners aren’t exactly known for embracing innovation. (See: the slow adoption of sabermetrics.) Also, it can be hard to find a qualified person who can work seamlessly with physical therapists, doctors and the rest of the staff. And for any of it to be effective, players and coaches must first buy in. “Many coaches will just roll their eyes at the mention of psychological flexibility or mindfulness,” says Steven C. Hayes, a professor of psychology at Nevada.

It helps that top athletes are dialing up the conversation around mental health and wellness: Michael Phelps, Simone Biles, Kevin Love and many others have spoken about the value of therapy in overcoming depression and anxiety. And for overall well-being, stars like LeBron James, Carli Lloyd and Steph Curry have added meditation and visualization exercises into their precompetition routines.

Steinfort uses a range of techniques to help players keep their minds clear and focused on performing, even when they’re not feeling their best. That means working not only with the athlete but also learning their moods and needs from teammates, friends and family. “I joke about it being like a secret agent,” Steinfort says. “Because

it's often background work and just a matter of subtly hearing things to figure out what's really going on for a person."

IN EARLY March, point guard T.J. McConnell was headed to Philadelphia with a 2015 vintage bottle of Penfolds Grange, an Australian wine, in hand. Before the coronavirus shut down the NBA season on March 11, his Pacers were set to face the Sixers, which meant McConnell, 28, who played in Philly for four years, would be reunited with Steinfort.

"With that comfort level I have with him, he was able to break me out of my shell," says McConnell. "I'm never one to really sit down and talk with someone about how I played or a bad stretch, but he's the guy where he's like, *We don't have to meet in my office. Let's go get a bite to eat and make it super casual and just talk.*"

McConnell, who admits he's "high-strung," recalls an informal, courtside conversation he had with Steinfort at the AT&T Center in San Antonio, when he was stressing out before a game. Steinfort's advice was simple, and seemingly inane: Just read the signs. So a nervous, skeptical McConnell spotted each banner hanging from the rafters and read the text, calming down all the while.

"It kind of got me into this Zen," he says. "It was weird." Sign-reading soon became part of the pregame routine for McConnell, who last season signed a two-year, $7 million deal with Indiana.

McConnell initially trusted Steinfort in part because he was an athlete himself: an Aussie Rules first-round selection of the Richmond Tigers at age 17. The 6' 6", 230-pound ruckman bounced around the sport for almost a decade, battling broken hands and feet, concussions, muscle strains and more. In the early 2000s, in one of Steinfort's first interactions with the profession he would later join, a Tigers performance coach encouraged him to give it his all despite his injuries, imparting a valuable lesson he shares with his clients today: *The game doesn't give a s--- how you feel.*

After retiring at 26, Steinfort eventually took his first job as a coach in 2011, with the Adelaide Crows. He never intended to build a career focused on mental performance, but that's what the team needed when they presented him with the following challenge: What can we look for in a prospect's psychological profile to help us unearth hidden gems?

Steinfort focused on qualities like grit and optimism to find athletes who compete despite setbacks, stay true to their goals, work humbly and push through tough physical challenges when they're not in the mood. He began compiling player profiles ahead of draft night, gathering insight from surveys prospects were given at draft camps, and took self-paid trips to the U.S. to learn best practices in the mental coaching field from different leagues.

After Adelaide made a coaching change, Steinfort took a buyout, moved

HEAD GAMES

Steinfort's techniques have worked for former Red Raider Mahomes (above) and Sixers stars Simmons (below left) and Embiid (right).

BRAD BLANKS/CBS RADIO (SIMMONS); COURTESY OF THE PHILADELPHIA 76ERS (EMBIID)

to the States in '14 and earned his master's in applied psychology at Penn a year later. Steinfort got his big break from Eagles coach Chip Kelly, who hired him as a performance coach in '15 to teach rookies resilience education. That led to gigs with the Blue Jays and Texas Tech in Steinfort's expanding portfolio of sports, which now includes athletes from Aussie Rules, cricket, rugby, soccer, golf, swimming and esports.

Each sport, he says, has its quirks, but Steinfort offers all the same menu of services: leadership coaching for athletes who want to set team standards and shape behaviors; relationship management for those who want to improve connections; mindfulness practice, which teaches focus and presence, especially under stress; expression sessions, in which the athlete shares emotional experiences to help quell unhelpful thoughts; and more.

Ultimately, Steinfort doesn't view his job as "calming the seas" to make athletes' rides less choppy—it's to enable them to hold themselves steady when the skies turn stormy.

SINCE THE coronavirus pandemic, Steinfort's role has taken on increased importance—and busyness. He must help players deal with what he calls the four "uns": an uncertain situation, an unclear future, unknown parameters and unexpected, novel stressors. At the same time, after the police killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and other Black people nationwide, the Black Lives Matter movement has gained momentum. Steinfort's job isn't to counsel athletes dealing with grief or other clinical issues, but he does "help them hold space for it" while competing so they can perform their best while sifting through challenging issues outside the game. "It can be difficult to go from so much momentum on the social justice front to possibly unmet (or under-met) expectations, as well as a shift in focus," he writes in an email. "And if we don't attend to that, individuals can develop feelings of loss or lack of mattering."

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Steinfort has a disarming charm that helps him relate to athletes who come from diverse backgrounds. "He's got the accent. He's from a part of the world that they've never been to, and played a different sport," says Arizona Cardinals coach Kliff Kingsbury, who worked with Steinfort at Texas Tech. "But he had a way of putting those guys at ease. Anytime he showed up, their eyes lit up."

Mental coaching is not all charm and character, though. It gets results on a neurological level, according to Hayes. He says athletes who are more "psychologically flexible"—a personality trait that describes an individual's ability to stay in the present moment, regardless of unpleasant thoughts or emotions, and behave according to one's values—are more likely to succeed. For example, in a 2018 study of elite-level hockey players in Sweden, a high flexibility, or mindfulness, score—measured by an adaptation of a common psychological questionnaire—correlated to an increase in players' assists and a team's points.

Hayes also references the Stroop test, a neuropsychological experiment used to measure attention capacity, processing speed and ability to prevent cognitive interference. In it, the word *blue*, for example, is written on screen in the color green, and the participant is asked to read the color of the word, not what the word says. Athletes who are able to focus blurt out the right color quickly. They do the same thing on the court: Mindfulness allows players to easily adapt to situational changes and "broaden" by processing what's happening even at the peripheries of their vision, so they can predict where their teammate's going to be for a key pass. "It requires practice," Hayes says. "This is not woo-woo. You can show it at the physiological . . . level."

Each month as Steinfort parachuted into Lubbock, Texas, to spend a few days with the Red Raiders, one player caught his eye in routine small-group and one-on-one sessions with team leaders: Mahomes. "He would be open and honest about what was on his mind," Steinfort recalls when asked about the quarterback. “He was a focused, hard-working, competitive beast who was humble and hungry to do whatever it took to get better.”

Competitiveness is key: That’s one of five traits Steinfort says can accurately predict performance, much better than, say, how confident an athlete is. (As for the other four, he says he’s not giving away his “secret sauce.”) By that logic, it’s no surprise that despite being just a three-star recruit out of high school, Mahomes went 10th in the 2017 NFL draft to Kansas City and has already been a league and Super Bowl MVP.

“Pat felt like he could trust him, and Paddy never tried to be over the top, but wanted to be a resource to him,” Kingsbury says. “Just wanted to be a sounding board.”

It’s not always easy for athletes to confide in a professional like Steinfort. Due to expectations of “mental toughness” and, for the men he works with, stereotypes about masculinity, it can difficult for them to channel their emotions, let alone share their vulnerabilities—especially with someone who works for their team and could adversely affect their livelihood. For this reason, Steinfort says he keeps details of each player’s trials and tribulations confidential from team officials. “You were probably the only person that I really opened up to,” 49ers running back Raheem Mostert recently told Steinfort on the latter’s *Toughness Podcast*.

Hayes notes how important character is for coaches like Steinfort, whom he credits with building MLB’s best mental skills program with the Blue Jays. “If you ever lie, if you ever manipulate, you’re done,” Hayes says. “The [successful] coaches tend to have that quality of being engaging and fun and creative—in the moment, not formulaic—so you can come at players from different angles that fit them.”

Red Sox outfielder Kevin Pillar, who first worked with Steinfort in Toronto, relayed athletes’ fears of opening up to his old performance coach: “There’s a stigma around people in your line of work—especially in baseball,” Pillar said on Steinfort’s podcast. “Personal information is so important because we feel like everything is used against us. There’s always some reason not to sign or play us, right?”

Pillar sought out Steinfort because he wanted to use every opportunity available to improve. Along with breathing exercises, he began practicing mindfulness by focusing on his back foot every time he entered the batter’s box, noticing the way his spikes dug into the dirt. “It was this metaphor of being present in the moment,” Pillar says.

But not every athlete is eagerly soliciting Steinfort’s services. Norvel Pelle, a Sixers rookie center and G League journeyman who was thinking too much before stepping on the court, finally decided to work with Steinfort a year after being introduced to him. The two have meditated together often, lessening Pelle’s overwhelming emotions. It was an unusual step for the 27-year-old, who says, “I’m the type of person who doesn’t talk about my feelings. . . . He’s a lifesaver.”

Steinfort is a master of helping athletes focus on what demands their attention while helping them file away other thoughts—one of the main attributes of psychological flexibility. “At the wrong time and with the wrong focus, looking at their emotions can actually be harmful, and so they learn to avoid it,” Steinfort says, “rather than be flexible about when and how they do it.”

FOOTY IN THE DOOR

A nine-year Aussie Rules vet, Steinfort (right) knows how to build trust with athletes.

TONY FEDER/GETTY IMAGES

NATURAL? YES.
DELICIOUS? YES.
OSCAR MAYER?
ABSOLUTELY!
Oscar Mayer
Oscar Mayer
NATURAL
HICKORY SMOKED
UNCURED HAM
CONTAINS UP TO 17% OF A SEASONING SOLUTION
NO ANTIBIOTICS EVER
NO ARTIFICIAL INGREDIENTS
NO NITRITES OR NITRATES ADDED
NO ARTIFICIAL INGREDIENTS. NO ANTIBIOTICS. EVER.

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MICHAEL J. LE BRECHT II

MENTAL performance principles don't just apply to traditional sports. The Sixers own Dignitas, an esports organization, and Steinfort works with its all-female *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive* team, which has won back-to-back Intel Extreme Masters Katowice championships in Poland. Even though competitors are sitting at computers, not sprinting through an arena, the cerebral component is perhaps even more important for their success.

"It produces the same threat response internally, in terms of our sympathetic nervous system kicking in, heart rate going up and breathing getting more shallow," Steinfort says. "It happens the same as it would when stepping up to shoot some clutch free throws."

Esports competitors like the members of Dignitas face cognitive hurdles that don't slow many traditional athletes, who often execute physical tasks without even thinking. "In football as a wide receiver, even if my mind is somewhere else, I'm so well trained physically that I can still execute the move," Steinfort says. "While I'm playing esports, yeah, my thumbs will still work, but it's very important for me to be super aware of what my teammates and opponents are doing, to be able to spot a target. . . . In a way, it's actually more challenging when their system gets hijacked by the stress response."

Emmalee (Emuhleet) Garrido, the captain of Dignitas's five-member *CS:GO* team, tries to spend as much time with Steinfort as possible whenever the team visits the Sixers' facilities. With his guidance, Garrido visualizes what could go wrong in a match, along with how to adapt to it, and braces for the worst: Computers crash, the mice sit on uneven tables, opponents bury them. It happens. It's the same strategy Phelps used when he famously won the 200-meter butterfly at the Beijing Olympics even though his goggles had filled with water—a stressful situation he had visualized in practice. (Hayes notes that the practice of visualization can backfire if an opponent reacts in a way that the athlete had not envisioned.)

"[Steinfort] doesn't treat us any differently because we're gamers or because we're girls," Garrido says. "He treats us the same as he treats the basketball players. He tells us what we need to hear, not what we want to hear."

Pelle has started sharing his breathing and meditation exercises with friends and family. That's exactly the kind of spread that excites Steinfort—it shows his teachings are making an impact beyond the sports community. And, aside from the fact that the game doesn't give a s--- how you feel, what is it that athletes have learned?

"You can't stop the waves in life," Steinfort says, "but you can learn how to surf." ☐

Oscar Mayer
IT'S NATURAL.
IT'S ON-THE-GO.
IT'S OSCAR MAYER.
JOB DONE.
TURKEY & ASIAGO
NATURAL
HAM & MONTEREY JACK
NATURAL
TURKEY & WHITE CHEDDAR
NATURAL
NO ARTIFICIAL INGREDIENTS.
UP TO 17G OF PROTEIN.
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GIGI WU WAS A WANDERER WHO FOUND SOLACE AND PURPOSE CONQUERING
OR SHE WAS AN EXHIBITIONIST WHOSE SWIMSUITED SELFIES ATOP THOSE PEAKS
OR SHE WAS A BIT OF BOTH. WHAT'S CERTAIN IS THAT THE MOUNTAINS GOT

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THE FATAL CALLING OF THE

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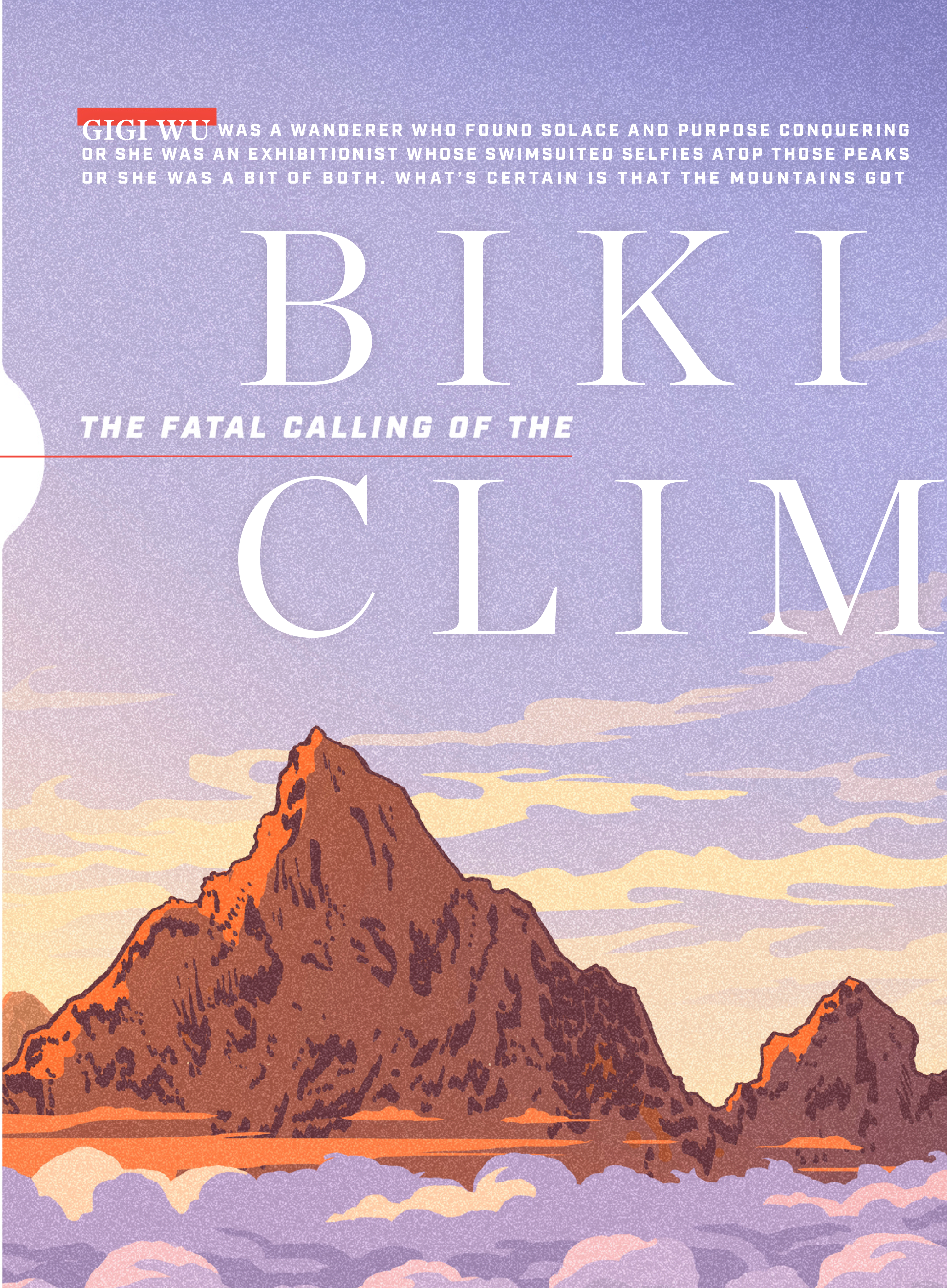


TAIWAN'S TOUGHEST MOUNTAINS.
FUELED HER SOCIAL MEDIA FAME.
SOMETHING FROM HER, TOO

NI
BER

THE TOTAL ATHLETE
p. 65

BY BRIAN BURNSED

SPECIAL REPORTING BY
JOE HENLEY

ILLUSTRATION BY
MATEUSZ KOLEK

WHEN GIGI WU WAS ALONE IN THE MOUNTAINS SHE USUALLY RANG A FRIEND AROUND 6 P.M. SHE WOULD LET HIM KNOW THAT MILES OF SLICK AND JAGGED TERRAIN WERE BEHIND HER. THAT SHE HAD FINALLY FREED HERSELF OF HER 65-POUND PACK AND WAS PREPARING TO SETTLE ON A FLAT PATCH OF EARTH FOR THE NIGHT. THAT SHE WOULD SOON PREPARE HER TEA AND RICE, JUST AS THE STARS STARTED TO SHIMMER.

But on a cold Saturday afternoon in January 2019, Alex Yang's phone rang at 4:30. *Too early*, he thought. *Too soon.*

Yang, a 52-year-old construction materials salesman with flecks of gray in his dark hair and a long, symmetrical face, took the call in his Taipei office. Wu, famous on social media for summiting some of the most menacing mountains in Taiwan—and, more pointedly, for posing at the end of each climb wearing only a bikini, the pics of which populated her Facebook page—was ringing on the satellite phone that Yang had bought her so she could stay tethered to the world during her increasingly dangerous solo sojourns. Wu, 36, typically spoke with a measured rasp, but now her words seemed hurried through the static. Over a frantic 30 seconds, as her voice faded in and out, Yang deciphered that she had tumbled down a cliff and couldn't move her legs. She needed help.

Wu begged her hiking friend to remember the article they'd recently discussed. The one about a trail that long ago connected villages inhabited by Taiwan's aboriginal people, but that had gone untended and largely unused as far back as 1895, when Japan took control of the island. *Remember that trail?*

He did. He also knew that temperatures in those mountains would likely dip near freezing at night. Yang told her to stay warm—and then the call fell dead.

His mind churned. Wu's voice conveyed a sense of urgency but not fear. He knew she kept the phone in her pack; her gear and food must be within reach. Besides, she had thousands of miles and hundreds of summits behind her. She was too experienced, too hearty, to succumb.

As Wu lay alone, Yang rushed to relay the call's coordinates to authorities at Yushan National Park, which spans 260,000 verdant acres across the middle of Taiwan. Then he tried to call his friend back. Every five minutes. Again and again and again.

Deep into the night he texted updates and reassurances, with no response. The local fire department was summoning rescue hikers. Helicopters would be coming. Her saviors would surge through the mountains to extract her.

Stay warm.

GIGI HAD been the only person at the bedside of her 63-year-old father, Sheng-cin, when a stroke felled him in April 2014. That day she lost the man who opened his heart to the Persian cat, Peggy, that she adopted during her brief time away at technical school. Who swam with her in the river near her grandparents' home when she was a child. Who showed her how to forage for snails on the river's banks, back when her hair was cropped boyishly close, not grown long enough to billow on breezy mountaintops.

When Gigi's employer, an international trading firm, asked her later that year to move to China, she took stock of her life. Her older sister, Yu-chi, had married and moved out of the family's modest fourth-floor flat in New Taipei City; her mother, Su-ran, was in her 60s and grieving. It was with this in mind that she quit her job, stayed home and directed the savings she'd amassed throughout her 20s toward a hobby that provided an escape from this profound new pain.

Gigi first encountered Alex Yang in 2014 on Jade Mountain, home to the highest peak in Northeast Asia, at 12,966 feet. They embarked on that trip with a climbing group organized by a travel agency, then bonded over their

WUS: A WHO'S WHO
Gigi in her preclimbing days, with Sheng-cin (above), whose death left her reeling; and beside Su-ran (left), with whom she would spar over her new passion.

COURTESY OF THE WU FAMILY

love of photography as they ascended. Still, Yang was shocked when, at the summit, his new friend shed her gear, down to a swimsuit top, and set up a photo shoot.

Wu explained a challenge and a dare. She was trying to conquer the 100 Peaks of Taiwan, a group of mountains, each at least 3,000 meters (or roughly 10,000 feet) above sea level, that are deemed to be the most demanding on the island. And at some point along the way she'd lost a bet with a friend, the payout being that she had to pose in a bikini top when she reached her next summit. Eventually, what started out as a dare for a slender, demure girl who had grown up hiding behind glasses turned into a tradition for a 5' 6" young woman learning to lean into her beauty and her bravery. In the early mountaintop photos Wu posted to Facebook, her hair was stringy and unkempt. Unflattering, baggy hiking pants hung from her hips. As months passed, though, she pulled on increasingly vibrant swimsuits, her hair grew longer and straighter, her poses turned more provocative. And with each photo she attracted more attention, more followers.

To some, the whole endeavor seemed a vanity project: sensationalism in a sacred space. But those close to her saw a devoted hiker using her allure to promote and preserve the mountains' beauty. On Facebook, Wu captioned her bikini photos with details about the routes she had taken to the top and alerted fellow hikers about difficult portions of each ascent. She interspersed the glam shots with snaps of misty forests and craggy trails, translucent mountain pools and vistas hanging above endless floors of clouds. While male commenters tended to laud her body, female followers christened her a mountain goddess.

In July 2016, when Wu finally reached all 100 summits, the accomplishment drew relative renown in a country where casual sexism reigns—where it's common for a man to critique a female coworker's hairstyle or weight. As it does elsewhere, the male gaze has shaped how Taiwanese women are expected to present themselves. Wu, friends believe, sought to reclaim her body. What some saw as an object of lust she turned into a symbol of pride, posing only on hard-to-reach plateaus where her fortitude would overshadow her figure. Anyone ogling her had to also gaze upon her success.

It was impossible, after all, to write off her accomplishment as some simple stunt. Taiwan's topography rises sharply from the sea, presenting a formidable challenge for even the most experienced climber. Except for the few trails the government maintains, most are laden with endless corridors of wet brush, and they tend to follow ridgelines or streambeds, making them more difficult to navigate than those that gently wind up mountainsides. Access to those paths had been cut off for decades, and when martial law on the island ceased in 1987, stringent regulation persisted, partly because the mountains had once been taken up by military strongholds. The government declared the bulk of the ancient trails off-limits to the public. Yet, as Wu's mountaineering savvy grew, so did her inclination to sidestep sanctioned routes and push the archaic boundaries that Taiwan's hiking community had for years lobbied the government to lift.

Even then: As influencers go, Wu was small-time compared with Taiwan's fashion and lifestyle elite, whose Instagram accounts are designed to profit from far more followers than her 14,000. Again and again she passed up opportunities to leverage her notoriety, turning down sponsorship deals from hiking equipment companies and declining a partnership with a mountain tour outfit. Even as Wu's savings dwindled, she remained wary of letting outside interests dictate the trails she hiked or the clothes she wore. She focused her posts instead on documenting where climbers could find water or cell service. She collected trash along her trails, took on extra weight to help injured or exhausted hikers and pushed herself to explore new terrain. Yang, by then a close friend, bought her the satellite phone and a Garmin GPS. Now she was aiming beyond the 100 Peaks; her goal was to summit every one of Taiwan's 268 mountains that top 3,000 meters.

Relatives, meanwhile, began prodding Su-ran, asking how she had lost control of her daughter. *Why doesn't Gigi work? When will she abandon these adventures?* And at home those conversations devolved into disputes. Gigi flitted in and out of their shared flat, only occasionally calling to ask her mother to make extra food for dinner. By 2018 she was spending nearly as many nights in the wilderness as she was in her bed.

On the mountains, too, a similar distance grew. As Gigi gained experience, fellow hikers struggled to keep pace, slowing her progress. She squabbled occasionally with friends over which trails to pursue, and to avoid those tensions gravitated toward solo outings, a dangerous undertaking on unfamiliar trails. In May 2017, she set out alone across the Central Mountain Range before turning back, noting later online that a mistake made while hiking solo "can be your last." A year later she posted a photo of her legs, scarred and bruised from a dangerous fall that she said almost took her life.

Near the end of a three-week trip in December 2018, she rejoined her fellow hikers for a party at one of the massive cabins scattered along the country's sanctioned trails. Some 150 people mingled there and in the surrounding campgrounds, and Wu bounced from group to group, engaging with those who wanted her and those who idolized her.

Camped on the edge of the party that night was 55-year-old Jon Solomon, a Massachusetts native who since the '80s had been hiking the country's toughest mountains. Solomon is an advocate of "ultralight" hiking; he aims for a slight food and equipment load, which helps him keep balance on Taiwanese trails frequently made soggy and slippery by subtropical jungles butting up against alpine forests. And when he ran into Wu the next day during one of her elaborate photo shoots, he was astounded by what she carried. Before setting out on a trip she and Yang would weigh her pack. For longer journeys the goal was to stay below 70 pounds—more than double Solomon's typical haul.

MOUNTAIN TOPS
Gigi's Facebook page became a shrine of her feats, each celebrated with a bikini pic and a sort of ode to the peak.

COURTESY OF THE WU FAMILY

Solomon and Wu traded notes that afternoon, and he encouraged her to lighten her load. She showed him her sustenance: candy bars that provided relatively little fuel for their weight, plus rice and noodles that required bulky cookware and, on occasion, extra water. He recommended swapping the candy for dehydrated meals. More concerning to Solomon, though, was the substantial equipment Wu had carried for her summit photo shoots, including a Canon 5D Mark III camera (about the weight of a pineapple), a pair of large lenses and an unwieldy tripod. Perhaps she could settle for less cumbersome gear? If she lost her balance, a light pack—one better proportioned to her body mass—was less likely to overpower and tug her down the mountain.

No one else at that mountain gathering, Solomon recalls thinking, would be inclined to offer such advice to Taiwan's most famous hiker, but he tried.

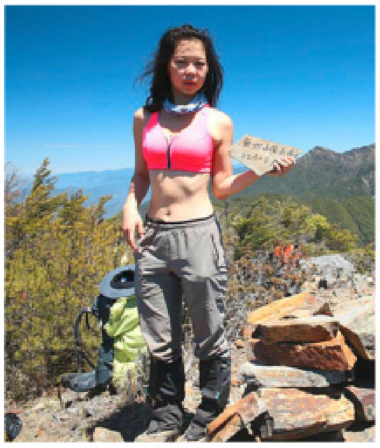
Nearly two years later he still recalls how Wu cut their conversation short, politely waving off his suggestions, and stepped back in front of her camera.

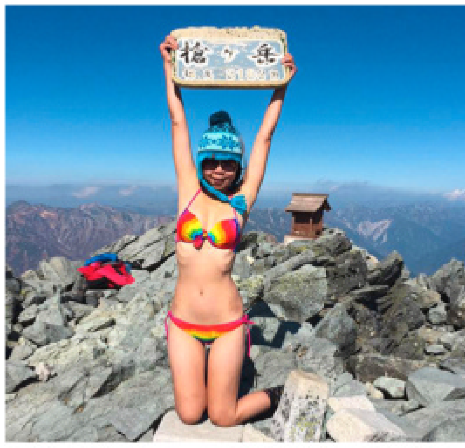
ON JAN. 11, 2019, after riding three trains and a bus, then spending a night in a cheap hotel favored by hikers, Wu hit the trailhead on a two-week trek through Yushan National Park in Central Taiwan. Her pack was laden with photo equipment, plus the food Yang had helped her purchase: bread, cheese, meat, coffee, rice milk, pineapple cakes, noodles . . . . She planned to start on the Batongguan Historical Trail, a familiar path, but then deviate (without an official permit) onto an unsanctioned and perilous aboriginal trail that neither she nor her hiking buddies had ever attempted. Her route would be a circuit, beginning and ending at the Dongpu hot springs to the west of the mountains, where Yang planned to pick her up on the 24th. On the first day of her hike Wu came upon a dead dog inside a mountain cabin, and carefully carried it outside.

Before setting off again, Wu consulted a weather report. The skies, she read, would be clear on the 18th and the 19th, which looked to be two of her journey's most arduous legs. On the first of those days, right before she planned to split off onto the aboriginal trail—descending the northwest face of Jupen Mountain, a 10,223-foot peak—she posted a picture on Facebook: a blanket of clouds captioned CELEBRATING TODAY.

On the 19th, Wu veered from any clear trail. Her route was a vestige of an old one, her boots crushing wide swaths of shale and detritus from the thick canopy of trees. The terrain would have demanded that she negotiate the steepest descents using her hands to brace against tree trunks while keeping her footing in unceasingly damp conditions.

The weather reports, though, had erred. Conditions worsened with every hour. Around noon Wu messaged another friend who had helped her map out a route. She had reached an altitude of almost 8,000 feet and planned to push down closer to 5,000 before setting up camp near a small river at the base of two long ridges. When she arrived she promised to let him know she was safe.





That friend says he never heard from her. Instead, at 4:30, Yang's phone rang.

By the time he took Wu's distress call and relayed the coordinates to park authorities—who in turn relayed them to the Nantou County Fire Department (typically tasked with mountain rescues) and then to the National Airborne Service Corps—the day had grown too late and the weather too poor to send out help on foot or by air. A new forecast suggested the skies would clear early in the morning. And while the temperature was predicted to dip overnight, it wasn't expected to fall below freezing.

At dawn, though, the rain kept coming. With the helicopters grounded in the fog, Lin Cheng-yi, a 38-year veteran of the fire department's Third Squadron, called upon volunteers from the Kalibuan, a segment of Taiwan's aboriginal Bunun tribe that tends to live at high elevations. Adept hikers, the Kalibuan often work as mountain guides for travel companies, and many of them help when a hiker goes missing.

At 8 a.m. on the 20th, a firefighter and two Kalibuan, including a 52-year-old tribesman named Buaq Soqluman—bare-scalped and stout—hopped into the bed of a blue pickup truck. They began ascending gravelly mountain roads in hopes of rescuing a woman who once posed for a picture with a member of the Kalibuan tribe when they crossed paths on the trail, and who had photographed their remote mountains to share that beauty with the urban masses along the coasts.

Armed with Wu's coordinates, plus food, tents, clothing, ropes and a portable stretcher that could be hooked to an airlift rig, the Kalibuan traversed a mountain road up to 8,200 feet, the closest they could get to her last known location, before setting off into unfamiliar terrain on foot. Another team of three men—two Kalibuan and a firefighter—hung back, hoping they might be able to get closer to Wu by helicopter. But the fog and the rain lingered, so they, too, set off by foot, around 1 p.m.

That afternoon, 100 miles to the north, police knocked on Su-ran's door and described a scenario she had never allowed herself to consider. Her daughter, the expert hiker, was in danger.

AFTER BARRELING down slick slopes for hours on end, 45 pounds of equipment strapped across each of their backs, the first rescue team finally reached an altitude around 5,000 feet, near the coordinates Wu had relayed to Yang. They knew she had been alive at least within the last 28 hours, roughly, and as night began to blanket the mountains, they believed they had found her. Well below them, Soqluman says, a mass—maybe a body—rested among a cluster of hiking equipment on a narrow platform jutting out from a cliffside that descended hundreds of feet to a river.

A fall to the bottom would have meant certain death. But it appeared Wu had been lucky enough to land on that flat outcropping of earth after a 100-odd-foot tumble. Soqluman called down, but his cries drew no response, no movement. The mass below them lay quiet and still in the darkness.

Rain and poor visibility made it impossible to descend the cliff face that night. Temperatures again dropped, just above freezing, too wet and too cold to start a fire, so Soqluman says the men retreated to their tents and waited, anguished, for dawn. The next day they rigged ropes to the cliffside and over several hours navigated a path down the steep slope laden with trees, wet leaves and stone.

Wu was lying on her back, eyes closed and mouth bloodied, when Soqluman reached her that morning. No breath. No pulse. Skin cold to the touch. Her backpack had settled near her, a satellite and cellphone by her right side and a flashlight tied to her left wrist. A silver aluminum sleeping pad covered most of her body, but her jacket was laid out next to her—perhaps odd to a hiking outsider, given the night's chill. Debris from food and drink littered the ground.

Without cover from the rain and cold, Soqluman surmised, she must have died the night after her fall. She was wearing hiking clothes, but the material was thin. As the cold gripped her, and as she was unable to dig the tent out of her backpack, moderate hypothermia would have induced amnesia and lethargy. Eventually, she would have ceased shivering and felt warm, accounting for the cast-aside jacket. As her condition worsened she may have hallucinated, perhaps explaining the toothbrush that seemed to have been carefully placed by her right hand. She might have believed she was settling in for another night's sleep in the mountains, no different from all the others. Her heart rate and breathing would have slowed. A coma would have followed. Then death.

THEY KNEW SHE HAD BEEN ALIVE WITHIN THE LAST 28 HOURS, AND AS NIGHT BLANKETED THE MOUNTAINS, THEY BELIEVED THEY HAD FOUND HER.

The Kalibuan couldn't determine what had caused Wu's fall, but vanity didn't seem to have been a factor. Her camera equipment was tucked neatly in its bag. The rescuers found her identification in her backpack, then reported her death to the fire station. Receiving the news, Lin wished they had found her in time, but he understood that others could have died if they had challenged nature more aggressively.

Owing to the uneven weather and the location of the body, it would be another two days before a ground team and a trio of helicopters could begin extricating Wu from her resting place. Rescuers first had to chainsaw three trees to create clearance for the air unit. Finally, on the morning of Jan. 23, a UH-60 Blackhawk hung 200 feet above Wu's corpse for an agonizing 38 minutes, the pilot holding the craft steady against wind cutting down from the mountain while a team hoisted the body onto a metal stretcher. An orange bag concealed Gigi from view. The aluminum hiking mat remained draped over her, flapping in the rotor's wash.

For Johnny Chiang, the rescue team's brigade commander back at base, the recovery proved the most arduous of his 32-year air-rescue career. Ultimately, he was sorry he was unable to save the woman who snapped one of his favorite pictures, capturing a chopper as it hovered over Jiaming Lake, along the park's southern border. Days later, he would place the photograph in Wu's coffin.

AFTER THE Kalibuan made their grim discovery, the news spread first among the dozen journalists awaiting word of Wu's fate at the primary school that her rescue team had used as its base of operation. Soon, though, the rest of the country knew.

In Taipei City, Su-ran had retreated to a Buddhist and Taoist temple after the police first showed up at her door; when she finally emerged from her prayers, a friend told her what everyone else had already learned.

Solomon, a month removed from his encounter with Gigi, was in Hong Kong when he heard of Wu's death. The news rattled him, but he wasn't shocked, given how she'd rebuked his gentle warning.

Thousands flocked to Wu's Facebook page, which turned into a memorial, loving goodbyes interspersed with photos of the climber wearing bright swimsuits atop the mountains she had conquered. Admirers praised her for spurring interest in climbing among her countrywomen, for exemplifying the inner strengths they themselves may not have realized, for being a role model to young girls who might not otherwise have strived for anything beyond physical beauty.

Alongside the praise, though, were harsh criticisms. Commenters suggested she had perished in a shallow pursuit of fame. Some incorrectly surmised that she'd been hiking wearing only a bikini—of course she froze to death, they chided. Headlines across the world, meanwhile, framed her as Taiwan's glamorous BIKINI CLIMBER, not an experienced mountaineer. Based on a persona that sprung from a dare, Wu was hastily lumped in with a small subset of social media risk takers who have died chasing clout, and with the hundreds more people around the world who have perished mid-selfie over the past decade.

Su-ran was stung by those scathing words, including some from family members, who insisted she should have done more to rein in her daughter's dangerous pursuits. The Taiwanese government weighed in, too, threatening to fine Su-ran $60,000 because her daughter had been hiking on an unsanctioned trail when helicopters and a cadre of climbers were marshaled to save her. In the end, Gigi's climbing friends intervened, and the government relented.

HOPE IN THE AIR

Rescuers and reporters awaited word of Gigi's fate at the grade-school baseball diamond that was commandeered for the operation.

ASIA WIRE

In New Taipei City that January, 300-odd people attended Wu's funeral, many of them hikers who'd traveled from far corners of the island to stand in a room overstuffed with mourners. They filled a memory book with messages of love and support, and Yang played a video capturing his friend's transformation from a little girl who'd frolicked in rivers to a revered mountain goddess.

After Wu's cremation, friends placed her ashes in a small box, which they deposited into a shallow hole under the shade of a fir tree in a southeast New Taipei City cemetery. A small stone, largely indistinguishable from others around it, would mark her grave in the most pristine portion of a vast burial ground carved into a hillside and often blanketed by mist in the winter.

One climbing friend, Rhode Lo, says he quit hiking for six months after Wu's death. Yang says he rarely ventures into the hills anymore. Without Gigi to provide color, the mountains seem muted.

Wu's old bedroom remains untouched; her hiking journals lie about, alongside memorial messages from fellow climbers. Su-ran lives alone now, but her daughter's extended family works to stave off the loneliness, whether it's a phone call or a shared meal. Lo sometimes will walk with her through the misty park where Gigi's ashes comingle with nature.

Su-ran has smooth skin for a woman of 70; the deep lines around her eyes reveal themselves only when she smiles. More often, though, she stares down for long stretches, the grief of losing Gigi overcoming her. She worries about how—*if*, even—her daughter will be remembered. That's why she settled on the anonymous stone under the shade of a fir tree. Gigi left behind no children, who customarily tend their parents' graves in Taiwan.

Wu's legacy persists, though. A few days after her death, a former government official publicly called attention to the fact that most of Taiwan's hiking fatalities—Wu was one of eight who died in Yushan last year—were unregistered adventurers, many of whom had fudged their itineraries and traveled on forbidden trails to skirt onerous regulations, making search and rescue operations more challenging. The government responded by urging better mountaineering and wilderness education, and officials started drafting amendments that would require warning signs be placed in dangerous mountain areas, absolving the government of liability in accidents.

Finally, last October, the country's prime minister, Su Tseng-chang, announced a monumental shift, which media and mountaineers credited to the awareness raised by Wu and later by her death. The government would lift access restrictions to the forests and mountains that had existed for decades, and Taiwan would invest nearly $23 million to restore 78 trails, renovate 35 cabins and improve route signage. Crucially, more cell towers would go up, helping imperiled hikers like Gigi maintain contact with the outside world.

Soqluman spent his youth hunting in those mountains. His livelihood now depends on them. And he welcomes the chance, finally, for others in his country to interact freely with that territory. When he and his fellow rescuers reached Wu's body on that cliffside platform, they stood in silence—trees rustling around them, river bubbling hundreds of feet below—and muttered a soft prayer before they began the delicate task of preparing her body to be spirited away.

They did not realize then the futility of their work. Even with ropes and carabiners and helicopters, they could never pull her from that place. Gigi Wu had long since given her life to the mountains. □

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SHE TORCHED MINNESOTA HIGH SCHOOL HOOPS AND IS HEADED TO UCONN. WITH A FOLLOWING ALREADY BIGGER THAN MANY PROS, SHE'S BASKETBALL'S NEXT STAR

PAIGE BUECKERS

BY **EMMA BACCELLIERI**

AT ONE OF HER basketball games last winter, Paige Bueckers's extended family made small talk with the people seated next to them. *Where are you from?* North Carolina. *And what brought you here to Minnesota?*

Paige, they said. The North Carolina family had flown to Minneapolis just to come to this high school gym and watch the 18-year-old phenom: Their young daughter was obsessed with her.

That seemed unbelievable, recalls Paige's mother, Amy. But perhaps it shouldn't have. Bueckers had recently been named USA Basketball Female Athlete of the Year. She'd just graced her first solo national magazine cover. (*SLAM*, in January, which deemed her "the most electrifying high school player in the world.") The 5' 11" UConn-bound guard had hundreds of thousands of social media followers and dozens of dedicated fan pages. Amy knew her daughter could fill a gym—but prompting a pilgrimage from several states away? That seemed like another level.

And yet, that would be eclipsed a few weeks later, when another set of new faces showed up to the gym at Bueckers's Hopkins High School: Timberwolves stars Karl-Anthony Towns and D'Angelo Russell, who sat at center court for one of the last games of her high school career. (She scored 33, with seven assists and seven rebounds.) "Next time, I need a jersey," Russell tweeted. "She's different . . . sheesh," Towns replied.

It's a good summary of the Paige Bueckers Experience: She's different. Now, she wants to make sure everyone knows it.

BUECKERS'S HIGH SCHOOL COACH, Brian Cosgriff, knew that the point guard was special long before she was on his team. He saw her play for the first time when she

BRI LEWERKE

was in elementary school—the tiniest one on the court, playing up a few grades, but "just tearing everybody up," he says.

That didn't go away. When Bueckers was ready to join his varsity squad in eighth grade, she was still small and so thin that she earned the nickname Olive Oyl. But her game was impossible to ignore. "Honestly, anybody who tries to sit there and say they taught her this, or they taught her that—no," Cosgriff says. "She was born with it."

Watch Bueckers play, and that seems evident. Any given highlight reel will include some slick baskets and probably a few steals, but what especially stands out is her passing. It suggests an uncommon relationship with the laws of physics—seemingly unconstrained by pressure, time or space. No target is off-limits. Bueckers sees everything. The result is a passing catalog that includes every flavor of jaw-dropping: no-look, cross-court, off the break. It's all pulled off with an economy of movement that would seem automated if it wasn't so balletic.

"Yeah, I don't know where I got that from," Bueckers laughs. "I just feel like I see plays two or three steps ahead."

This kind of vision allows her to elevate the game of everyone around her and makes her a natural leader on the floor. "She's got the mentality that if I pass and you score, that's just as fun for me as if I have the bucket," says UConn women's basketball coach Geno Auriemma. "And that's rare in a player that can score so easily herself."

Hopkins's record with Bueckers speaks for itself. The team qualified for the state title game in each of her five seasons and was undefeated across her junior and senior years. Her career was cut short by COVID-19: The state championship game was canceled just before it was scheduled to take place, denying her a chance at a second consecutive title and for a 62-game winning streak to become 63. But there's no question about her legacy.

This means that she has little experience with losing. (Bueckers has won plenty on Team USA, too, with gold medals at the U-17 and U-19 FIBA World Cups.) At UConn, she's planning for more of the same: It's been her "dream school" forever, she says, and she's hoping to join a new era of domination in Storrs. While the storied program has not won a title since 2016—a serious drought, by its standards—she's determined to return the Huskies to glory.

"I hate losing. If we could go undefeated all four years, that would be great," Bueckers says. "Being realistic, though, that's probably not going to happen."

HOOPS ROYALTY
Bueckers had led her high school team on a 62-game win streak when the pandemic cut short their season.

SENIOR YEAR, PER GAME: 21.0 Points **9.2** Assists **5.1** Rebounds

More pragmatically, then? She'd take four national titles.

"You have to have a little bit of cockiness," Auriemma says, "and she's got just enough of it. But at the same time, there's a humble quality to her that I really admire."

Bueckers says that, in Storrs, she wants to let her game speak for itself. To that end, she says she's trying to cut down on her trash talk, but Cosgriff laughs at that idea: "She might think that, but I've had enough arguments with her to know, Paige has to have the last word."

If all this seems liable to invite a lot of hype, Bueckers was going to have the hype, and then some, anyway: There's never been a female player who's entered her freshman year with such an established fan base.

Bueckers's 550,000-plus followers on Instagram are unmatched for a teen in her shoes. (For context, it's more than double the followers of Breanna Stewart, triple that of Chiney Ogwumike, and six times that of Diana Taurasi, all of whom are active on the platform.) Bueckers has grown increasingly comfortable under that spotlight, however, which reflects a shift in the last few years, says her mother.

"I just noticed a transition in her confidence level," says Amy. "How she would handle the big-pressure situations—she just took everything in stride. She took it very seriously, but she didn't have a lot of nerves, and she became so much more comfortable. Her personality started to come through."

As she received more buzz, Bueckers became more secure as the "goofy kid" that she was with her family, now at ease with herself in front of crowds and cameras. "She just reminds me of an old-fashioned kid," Auriemma says. "It almost feels like 30 years ago when I first came to UConn—those kids walked around like, what's the big deal? . . . She doesn't seem like this kid walking around with an aura."

If not for the basketball highlights—and the thousands of comments—her social media presence *could* pass for that of any teen, playing around with her siblings and dancing on TikTok. She'd never had trouble putting all of herself on the court. But now, she was more confident off it—which also meant speaking up more about what matters to her, like Black Lives Matter.

"I'm just trying to use this in a positive way," she says. "It's kind of cool to think about how someone my age, a female athlete, can have all that attention."

Her combination of platform and game has come with proclamations that she's the future of women's basketball—if not of basketball, period. But she feels ready for that, too.

"I think the women's game deserves a lot more respect," she says. "And it's a really exciting time right now for us, because I think we're getting there. . . . I feel like I can really try to help that."

Because of the pandemic, Bueckers's move-in date at UConn was pushed from May to June to July. The delays made it a bit anticlimactic—enough so that she asked her parents if they'd be hurt that she wasn't sad when it was time for her to finally leave. (Her mother jokingly asked why she was so sure they'd be sad to finally watch her leave.) Now, at last, she's trying to settle in as she begins workouts with her new teammates.

As she does, people could do worse than adopting some wisdom from her high school coach.

"The best thing I ever did," Cosgriff says, "was stay the hell out of her way." ☐

GROWING VOICE
Fans flock to the Bueckers's social media accounts, which she is now using to address more than basketball.

MALE HIGH SCHOOL **ATHLETE OF THE YEAR**

SIZE, STRENGTH, ATHLETICISM: THEY MADE HIM THE TOP TIGHT END RECRUIT. ADD A HUMBLE AND GENEROUS SPIRIT, AND YOU HAVE THE MAKINGS OF A LIFELONG LEADER

ARIK GILBERT

BY **BEN PICKMAN**

FROM LEFT: BRI LEWERKE; COURTESY OF JOHNNY WALKER

AFTER SCHOOL one day when he was in sixth grade, Arik Gilbert walked into the classroom where his mother, Akiba, taught computer science and web design at Maynard Holbrook Jackson High in Atlanta. At the time Arik considered himself a basketball player: He was already nearly six feet tall and played for a handful of travel teams. Besides, hoops was in his genes. Akiba had been a forward at UNC Charlotte and coached a number of his youth teams.

Arik hadn't played organized football in a few years—but as he watched a rec team practicing through the school window, his mom could tell the sport was calling to him. "Arik," Akiba said, "don't you go out there and go on that team."

He couldn't resist. Arik ran out to join the kids doing their best Randy Moss impressions, and it didn't take long for him to stand out. A half-hour later he went back upstairs: "Mom, the coaches want me to play for them. They want to talk to you."

"Arik," his mom shot back.

"What? I didn't do nothing!"

Arik is now 6' 5", 253 pounds and an 18-year-old who just finished his senior year at Marietta (Ga.) High, but one thing hasn't changed: When he walks onto a football field, people notice. Last season Gilbert was the best high school tight end in the country: He was No. 12 on ESPN's Class of 2020 overall prospect list and was named to the SI All-American team. He'll be joining the high-powered LSU offense this fall. But before he started his college career, one more accolade came his way this summer: He was named the Gatorade Male High School Athlete of the Year.

Gilbert's physical gifts are obvious: He's already a polished route runner and he dazzles scouts with unusual body control for a player his size. But his rise as a football player and as a leader has also been driven by his calm demeanor and steady temperament. "He's just different," explains John Towler, a longtime Georgia-based youth football coach and one of Gilbert's mentors. "There are just a handful of people in the world like him."

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SENIOR YEAR: 1,860 Receiving Yards **15** TDs **STATE CHAMPS** Georgia Class 7A

GILBERT WAS initially a running back. He played for the DeKalb County Trojans in the second grade, and his parents remember him plodding through the middle of defenses as opposing players latched on to their son's arms, legs and back. His size—he was 10 pounds, 11 ounces, at birth and was always bigger than his peers—gave him a clear advantage. "He wasn't really running fast," his father, Avis Sr., says. "But he wasn't going down."

GILBERT IS READY TO MAKE A NAME FOR HIMSELF ON THE FIELD AT LSU, BUT HE HAS ALSO HAD BIGGER GOALS. "I DON'T WANT TO BE JUST AN ATHLETE," HE SAYS.

PRESENCE FELT

Gilbert scored 29 TDs in his last two seasons at Marietta—and made real social impact with his outreach group, Whisper.

COURTESY OF JOHNNY WALKER (2)

When Gilbert was nearly three, his parents divorced. He spent most of his time living with his mother; older brother, Avis Jr.; and younger sister, Amila. In 2006, almost a decade after enrolling at UNC Charlotte, Akiba finished her bachelor's degree at Georgia College & State University, while working a full-time job and also caring for her children.

Akiba wanted to get her sons involved in sports, but she faced serious financial constraints. Gilbert stopped playing football for the most part after second grade; in its place, Akiba sought out basketball leagues where she could coach, thus allowing her boys to play for free. What Gilbert lacked in grace on the court—he spent a lot of time on the floor after tripping over his own feet—he made up for in energy and physicality. "It was really just about them being competitive," she says. "And Arik has a motor that just won't stop."

So it should be no surprise that Gilbert fell back in love with football on that sixth-grade afternoon. A few years later, at a preseason tournament in the summer before eighth grade, he met Towler, a scout for a youth development program called Football University. By then Gilbert was 6' 3" and a wide receiver and defensive lineman for the Atlanta Vikings; he got his spot on the team after Akiba offered to create the Vikings' website in exchange for waiving the participation fee.

The jamboree was played on a "flattened cow pasture that somebody drew the lines on," Towler recalls, with 20-minute, running-clock games played all day. In one of those mini games Gilbert had two sacks and three quarterback hurries, and caught two touchdowns. "He immediately jumped out at you," Towler says. "He was very raw, but he was different athletically."

Towler befriended the Gilbert family and became a football adviser for Arik. Over the years he shuttled Arik to camps and took him on college recruiting visits. Towler told him that he'd be held to a higher standard than his peers because of his football ability and warned him to be careful about who he let into his inner circle. "Arik took all that to heart," Towler says. "He had to grow up faster than most."

At those camps, talent evaluators were struck by his size, leaping ability and drive. By the time he entered ninth grade he had already received scholarship offers from Alabama, Georgia and Tennessee, among other schools. He spent his freshman year at Woodward Academy, a private school in the Atlanta area. But when Akiba got a

GATORADE HIGH SCHOOL ATHLETE OF THE YEAR

FINALISTS

MALE	FEMALE
EMONI BATES Ypsilanti, Mich. Basketball	**JAYDA COLEMAN** The Colony, Texas Softball
JARED KELLEY Refugio, Texas Baseball	**TAYLOR EWERT** Beavercreek, Ohio Track and field
JONY MUÑOZ Olathe, Kans. Soccer	**EMILY MASON** Flemington, N.J. Soccer
NICO YOUNG Newbury Park, Calif. Cross-country	**JESS MRUZIK** Livonia, Mich. Volleyball
NICO YOUNG Newbury Park, Calif. Track and field	**KATELYN TUOHY** Thiells, N.Y. Cross-country

job teaching in the digital lab at Marietta High, Arik transferred there.

His mom says the move "took Arik out of his comfort zone," but if he was uneasy it didn't show on the field. As a sophomore he played defensive end and tight end, with 570 receiving yards and six sacks. He also started workouts with Terrence Edwards, a wide receivers coach at Football University who while at Georgia had broken the SEC record for total receiving yards. "He was the one who got me right," Gilbert says. The work paid off: As a junior he totaled more than 1,200 receiving yards and caught 14 touchdowns, dominating opponents with a combination of size and athleticism. "He'd come down with the ball like Charles Barkley would on a rebound," Towler says.

Marietta struggled to a 6–7 record that year, but in Gilbert's final high school season the Blue Devils rebounded. They went 14–2 and won Georgia's 7A state championship. Gilbert had 1,860 receiving yards and 15 touchdowns. "There are really only three people that I can compare him to on an athlete basis, and that's Vernon Davis, Travis Kelce and Rob Gronkowski," Towler says. "All amazingly talented and athletically gifted."

THE DAY AFTER their state final victory, Gilbert and a number of teammates went to a birthday party for a local sixth-grade student, a ballboy for the Blue Devils. The boy's mother had asked Gilbert to come weeks earlier, before anyone knew he and his team would be celebrating a championship that day. Gilbert played quarterback in the front-yard pickup game. Afterward, he signed cleats, footballs and calendars. It's one example of why, throughout his time in Marietta, he has become as well known for his community impact as for his athletic abilities. One more: On game days during the season, Gilbert and other Blue Devils visited local schools to build community and fan excitement. Coach Richard Morgan says Gilbert was always a kid magnet. Akiba says that parents frequently came up to her, impressed at how generously her son gave of his time.

At the start of his senior year, Gilbert founded his school's chapter of Whisper, an initiative to encourage inclusion, diversity and technology-free conversations among students. He says he started the group after seeing peers who were left out of social situations and because he knew firsthand how it felt to be isolated—whether it was as a young kid who was always bigger than everyone else, or as a high school sophomore starting a new school in a new town. "It was a blessing to see him take his own personal struggles of acceptance and use it within his community," Akiba says.

"I don't want to be just an athlete," Gilbert says. Now he's learning how he can make an impact in Baton Rouge; he enrolled at LSU this spring and is preparing for a college football season that he hopes will happen in the shadow of the coronavirus pandemic. He's already made a good impression. This summer Tigers coach Ed Orgeron said fans should be "excited to see [Gilbert] play." It might be this fall, or it might not be until 2021. Either way, Gilbert will be prepared.

"I feel like I still got a lot of stuff to do," he says. "But I never take my focus off my goals." □

JEFFERY A. SALTER (BATES); MICHAEL J. LE BRECHT II (TUOHY); COURTESY OF GATORADE (8)

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